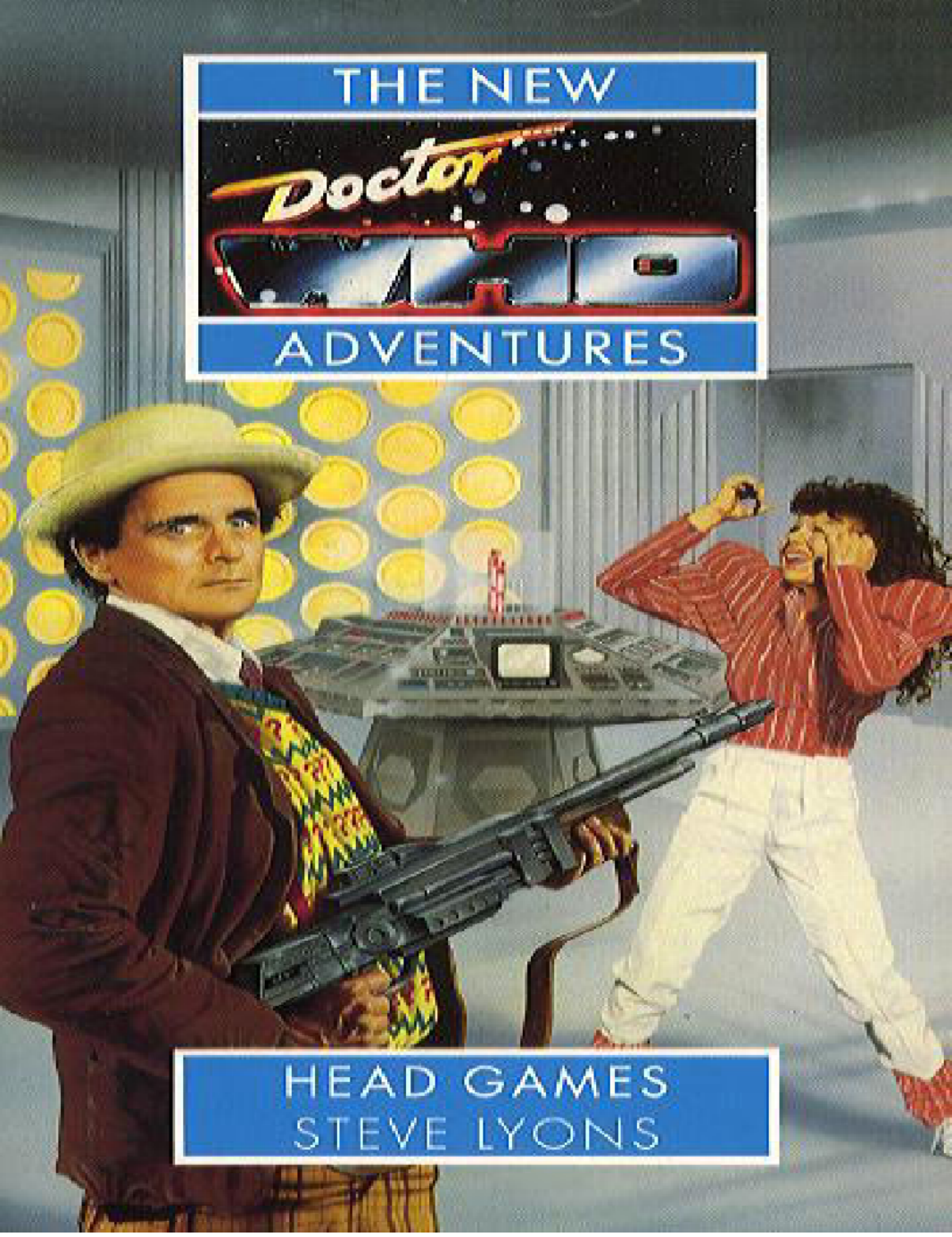
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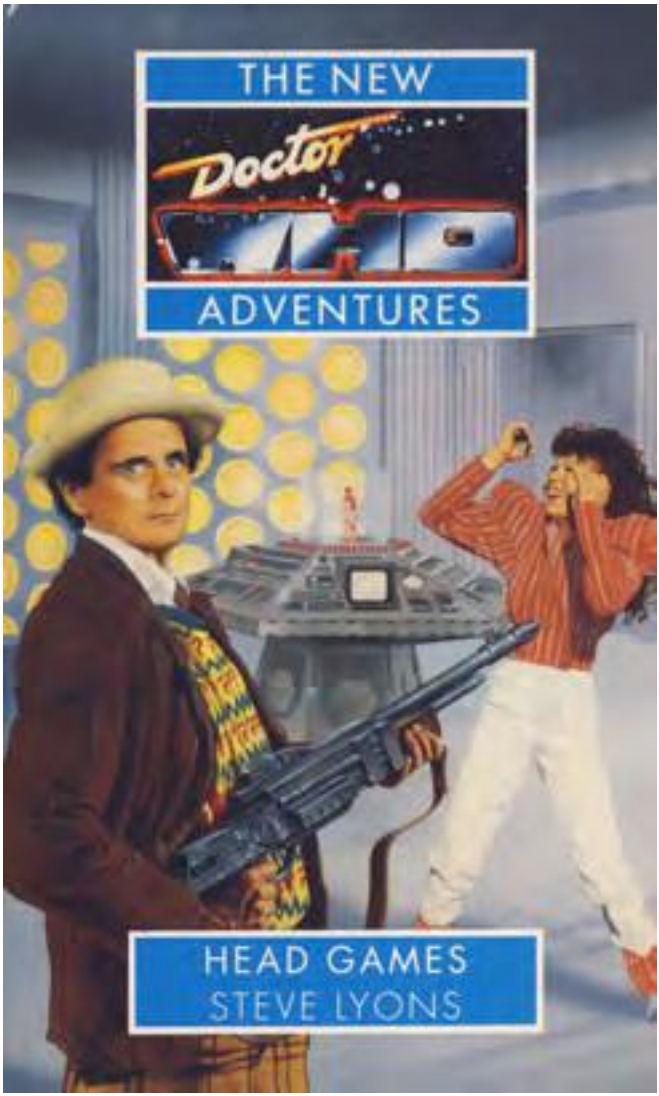

HEAD GAMES

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Steve Lyons

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With thanks to Peter Ling, for creating the Land of Fiction in the first place.

Head Start

When the wind blew outside, the dim light bulb flickered. Cold air sneaked around the rotting window frame and curtains flapped against peeling plaster with a sound like leathern wings.

It didn’t matter any more.

He would be out of this bedsit soon enough; Jason knew that, embraced it as a certainty. He was going to the stars, to sail the solar winds. To visit planets, right wrongs and fight monsters.

Everything a space-age superhero should do.

First, he had to get the story right.

Jason stared at the four words he had written. *Once upon a time*. He screwed up his face as if, by willing it, he could make the battered

manual typewriter complete the tale of its own volition. Finally, frustrated, he ripped the paper from its roller, crushed it into a ball and hurled it savagely across the room. It bounced of the tattered Def Leppard poster, knocked the chipped plaster figurine of Frank Sidebottom from its shelf and came to rest on the thread-bare carpet amidst a veritable sea of its predecessors.

With increasing urgency, Jason wound a fresh sheet into position. He didn't have long. The opportunity would soon be gone and he might not get another like it.

He stabbed at a few letters tentatively. This time, he was pleased with the result. He began to allow himself hope — and as the work progressed, his two-finger typing became faster and more frenzied. It was as though the energy was guiding him, bleeding from his fingertips and into the keyboard and, through that, to the printed characters on the page; to the story he had been waiting to write.

1

He could almost see it. It was going to work.

Jason knew he couldn't stop then, even when a gust of stale air blasted through the tiny room. He kept his eyes on the unfolding text as a raucous trumpeting sound struck up; as it grew in volume and reverberated from the four walls of his squalid existence. He was writing the prologue to the rest of his life and he couldn't let anything stop him. Not until it was complete.

When at last it was, Jason turned round and looked — and saw what he had been waiting almost seven years for.

There was a box in the corner. A blue one, six feet high, with a door on the front and an inscription above it. *Police Public Call Box*. Jason smiled as the door opened and a good-humoured, almost impish, face peered through the orifice.

'And where might the TARDIS have brought me this time?'

He was so excited that a full five seconds passed before his vocal chords could respond. 'Earth. 2001.'

The man emerged from the box fully, and Jason inspected his attire curiously. Baggy, checked trousers, paisley scarf, chocolate brown jacket and an odd, question-mark patterned pullover. 'Any monsters here? Any rogue androids, despicable villains, megalomaniacs

attempting to take over the universe?'

A Scottish burr coloured the words which rolled from the stranger's tongue. His eyes gleamed blue — or was that green?

It was hard to tell in the poor light. 'Any heartless despots attempting to deprive the world of tea and biscuits?'

Jason shook his head.

'No danger and excitement, then? No nefarious wrongdoings to warrant my attention?'

'No. 'Sboring.'

'Then we shall have to find somewhere that does have those things, shan't we?'

Jason nodded vigorously, his face alight. The stranger smiled and beckoned the young man into his craft. The door closed softly behind them and the noise of trumpets bellowed out again as the unearthly container slowly vanished.

In the seconds which immediately followed its departure, 2

someone banged on the dividing wall and yelled for silence; the bulb blinked out and plunged the room into darkness; and the typewriter chattered, playing out a staccato rhythm of its own.

Jason and the stranger left then, to begin a new life .filled with adventure.

Almost as an afterthought, it wrote: *And they all lived happily ever after.*

3

1

Bad Dreams (1)

The Doctor tried to hold on to the good times.

He forced himself to think about Terra Alpha: the planet where happiness was mandatory, where death squads had punished those who had dared to feel blue. Five hundred thousand murders. He had saved its people from more, taught them a valuable lesson and defeated their leader, the monstrous Helen A, without having to destroy her. His new companion, the girl Ace, had practically idolized

him. ‘I want to be like you,’ she had said. Or some such words to that effect.

Remember the good times.

‘So how do you do it?’ she had asked in the TARDIS later.

He had mumbled something non-commital, hidden blushes, pretending not to know what she meant. ‘I mean, this is a regular thing for you, right?’

‘It does consume a proportion of my time,’ he had admitted, with an embarrassed smile. But it’s really only a matter of being able to distinguish right from wrong.’

‘I suppose so. So you stroll into a place, find out what’s up, confront what’s causing the badness and, if they won’t listen, band the victims together and force the rulers to see sense.

Wicked!’

That was when the control room’s central column had come to rest, a sign that the Doctor’s extra-dimensional vessel had materialized elsewhere. Ace had bounded up to the console exuberantly. ‘So what next? Daleks on Skaro? Mercenaries on Mars’? Giant fleas on Pluto?’ She hadn’t seen the Doctor’s face fall as she operated the scanner control — as he realized where they’d landed. ‘Ace! There’s plenty of injustice here, right? Just pick a grievance! Where do we start, Professor?’

4

It had never been the same after that. Ace had always liked things simple, had wanted to believe she was doing good in a dangerous, exciting and, above all, clear-cut way. She had had her suspicions before, during that business with the Hand of Omega — but this was the first time she had really questioned the Doctor’s motives openly. The first time she had ever doubted him.

Looking back on it, he might have tried to explain more.

Perhaps he could have saved them both considerable heartache further down the line. Instead, he had withdrawn into himself, tried to fob her off with platitudes about the Universal Good and the Great Scheme of Things. They had visited other planets and they’d gone through the formula again: they confronted monsters, battled cruel

dictators, inspired brave men and women to overthrow corrupt regimes. But Ace never understood why it always had to be different on Earth.

This was what the Doctor had been trying to avoid. The bad times had corrupted the dream, washing over the good ones so that only the misery and guilt remained.

He had to lose them. Before they did more damage.

'Oncoming,' chirped the high-pitched voice of the onboard computer. The warning was unnecessary. Bernice had already thrust the steering into full left tilt, although not quite in time to avoid a hit. The speeding, fat airbus clipped her anti-gray unit and she fought for control as the sky-bike's underside sparked against the edge of one of Metro City's grey monoliths. With a string of expletives, she gunned the rockets and shot up twelve storeys to where the traffic wasn't quite so heavy.

'Close call,' the computer baited her. 'You need to brush up your flying skills.'

'Is that a professional judgement or are you just looking to get an axe in your processors?'

'We are touchy today. Want to talk about it?'

'Great. Navigation, running commentary, aeronautical tutorials and now elementary psychoanalysis.'

'Not to leave out criminal detection,' the computer added.

'Two o'clock, three storeys down.'

5

He was on the rooftop of a smaller building, across the airway. The silver costume was unmistakable; Bernice couldn't help but think of baked potatoes. She could even make out the tell-tale question mark, in lurid crimson on the figure's chest.

The computer yelled in mock terror as Benny kicked in the rockets and sent the sky-bike screaming towards her masked adversary. No way was she losing him again. She could feel her teeth rattling in the sudden turbulence and her stomach rose into her ribcage.

Then the blaring of a horn alerted her to a more immediate concern. By the time the computer shouted its warning, she had already slammed on the airbrakes. The car shot across her path, two fingers waving from the pilot's window. The distraction was enough for her quarry to disappear. She searched the skies and saw him as the computer did.

'He's under the airbus!'

Another of the grey blimps, a short way above and ahead. He was dangling from the undercarriage, seemingly unconcerned about the tremendous drop. Bernice grinned. She had him.

Then, to her astonishment, he let go of the vehicle, performed a triple somersault and made an impossibly perfect landing on the back of a hovercar. By the time she had changed her own course, he was three blocks east and a dozen storeys below, leaping from car to flagpole to rooftop to car as if negotiating stepping stones in a river. She twisted the bars this way and that, lost sight of him, locked on again and finally lost him altogether.

Then suddenly she was coughing and the sky was filled with red and blue smoke. She sent the bike on a vertical plummet beneath the cloud and almost went straight through another vehicle in the process. Traffic had come to a standstill, gridlocked by the disruption of the complex air passages and rights of way that Benny had been cheerfully ignoring for the past half-hour. It's a message,' the computer observed, rather superfluously. It would have been hard to miss the twelve foot high, multi-coloured letters which hovered in the sky.

WHAT'S BIG AND RED AND EATS ROCKS?

6

—?Q.

'I don't believe it.'

'The Quiz's stock-in-trade: a bad pun.'

'Yes, thank you Sherlock.'

'To which the answer is: "A big red rock eater." '

'Pathetic!'

‘Don’t blame me, I only solved it. By the way, there’s a café on the corner of forty-nine and third called the “Red Rock Eatery”.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Want me to overlay a course on your street guide?’

Bernice sighed and slid the bike back into gear. ‘What I want is for you to wake me up. I’ve got to be dreaming!’

‘I hope not. You’re driving.’

In real life,’ she considered, ‘I would not put up with this. I would not be in the most over-populated, over-developed, labyrinthine city in the galaxy chasing a lunatic with a puzzle fetish on an antiquated sky-bike with the dubious assistance of the smart-mouthed, sarcastic computerized equivalent of . . . of .

. .’

‘Of you?’

‘Damn, yes!’

‘If you’ve time to steer around that penthouse extension whilst you’re soliloquizing . . .’

Bernice performed the necessary course adjustment and a frown creased her forehead. ‘Come to think of it,’ she said, ‘I don’t know what I *am* doing here.’

The Doctor was dreaming. And hurting. And struggling to remember good things: laughing, joking, the victories and the celebrations.

He remembered the camaraderie. His elite group of handpicked agents: the Doctor, Ace and Benny, standing united and invincible against a procession of loathsome foes. Good versus evil, with no shades of grey. But something in his mind forced him to recall the bad times too. Ace, older and bitter, sick of his betrayals and secrets, infuriated by his complicity in 7

parting her from Robin and letting Jan die. Bernice, so angered by the destruction of the Seven Planets in the Althosian System and never understanding why he’d had to let it happen.

They had both forgiven him, at last, and things had been good again. Ace had left, but she had done so on friendly terms, like so many

others. Bernice was still by his side, one of the Doctor's most devoted and longest serving partners. But there were so many things on his conscience, so much human misery to atone for.

At times like this, when he was lying to his companions and manipulating them again, he felt the pain of that intensely.

Only as the bike plummeted five hundred storeys did Benny fully appreciate how high she had been. The thought alone made her dizzy.

At ground level, Metro City was as decrepit and congested as it had been above. However, as she threaded through the ground-crawling traffic, Benny's eye was attracted to more than one extraordinary feature. 'It's an archaeologist's nightmare,'

she complained at length. 'These beautiful Victorian buildings with ugly twentieth-century frontages and post-Modernist tower blocks sticking out of them.'

'Metro City was assembled over many years,' the computer said.

'Thrown together, more like. If I'd been on that planning committee, I'd've —'

'Bomb warning.'

'— had the city architects hung, drawn and — what did you say?'

The explosion caught her side on; it was all she could do to keep the buffeted sky-bike from flattening her against the wall.

Glass rained on her coveralls and she shot upwards to avoid it.

Everyone else had the same idea. At second-storey level, it was impossible to move. She was deafened by shouts of abuse and by the angry clamour of ineffectual horns. 'Don't tell me,' she muttered. The "Red Rock" just went up in flames, right?'

'A second earlier and we'd have been in that inferno.'

'Two seconds and we mightn't have lost him.'

'We haven't. Twelve storeys up and climbing.'

'Let's get the bastard!'

That determination was not so easy to translate into action.

Bernice spent five long, frustrating minutes working her way back through the traffic. The wait was almost worth it when, nine storeys up, she could finally put her foot down again. ‘I’ve lost the trace,’ the computer admitted, ‘but he was heading north-north-west when I last had him.’

‘Then it must be my lucky day. I see him.’

‘You do?’

The Quiz was doing his cross-town car-hopping bit again, with a casual air that suggested he hadn’t seen her. Benny gave it maximum thrust, deliberately heedless of the computer’s strangulated warning shout.

The next thing she knew, she was in freefall, the bike hurtling down beside her, and she had one monster of a headache.

She rolled instinctively as she hit the rooftop, barely avoiding impalement by the sky-bike’s handlebars. Thin plastic strips fluttered about her. ‘I warned you,’ wailed that infuriating mechanical voice. ‘You’ve bruised my bio-chip now.’

‘What happened?’

‘You crashed through a video advertising hoarding. The Quiz must have wired it up to screen footage of his own escape through the city. If you’d paid more attention, you might have realized.’

‘Battered by a billboard!’ Benny checked her body tentatively for lasting damage, then righted the bike and dusted its saddle down. ‘So where do we go now, Sherlock?’

As if in answer, a sliver of plasti-fibre video screen fell from her hair. A message was scrawled on it, painfully small letters formed by green crayon:

WHY DIDN’T THE EGG LAUGH?

—? Q.

Bernice read the riddle out loud, then sighed. ‘If the answer to this one contains the word “yolk”, I really don’t want to know.’

‘There’s a “Chuckle Egg” joke shop off the Metro Shopping 9

Precinct,' the computer offered.

She groaned, only partly at the pain she felt as she straddled the sky-bike again. 'You'd better show me.' The direction finder snapped on obligingly.

Benny kicked the engines into action and slipped back into the mid-afternoon traffic. 'I've changed my mind,' she said ruefully. 'This can't be a dream. I'm hurting too much.'

The Doctor had killed Ace once. He had pulled her strings and dragged her to the moon, making her a pawn in a lethal game of chance. He had snatched her back across the brink of course, but in the meantime she had been trapped in his own mind, hating him for what he'd done. He had always felt vulnerable to her after that after she had seen the deepest, darkest facets of his own psyche. But he had managed to keep some secrets from her still.

He had never told Ace why he so rarely slept now, what he didn't wish to face in dreams. He never talked of the barrier in his head or the fear that, one day, it might crumble. He had never told her about the tortured, embittered personality imprisoned within him and demanding release.

The Doctor was asleep and, in the drifting half-consciousness of the dreamworld, he could not remember why he'd given in.

Why now?

'You killed me!' a voice hissed; the voice that this Doctor was afraid of. 'You killed me and you're killing your friends too.'

'I deny you,' he muttered tersely, trying only to think of the good times, to rebuild the barrier that self-reproach was diminishing. 'I do what I have to do. I can't let you stop me.'

'But you are evil,' the voice goaded him. 'You cause upset and grief, use people like tools, act as though the cosmos is your gameboard to play on as you will.'

He remembered Ace, just after the moon. They had chatted about his past, the other selves she had encountered in his mindscape. Sharing memories. He didn't do that often.

She had asked him about the others; those two she had not met. He had changed the subject. He hadn't told her about the 10

one whose life he had deliberately curtailed. He had lied to her, over and over again.

'I am Time's Champion!' the Doctor bellowed, summoning all his remaining strength to wake him from this nightmare, to banish these unwanted feelings. 'And guilt is a luxury I can no longer afford!'

'Time's Champion,' his own words echoed across the void.

'Luxury. Afford. No room.' Above it all: 'Guilt. Guilt.'

The door was wooden and featureless, set into a brick wall in a dead-end alley from which even the traffic sounded distant. A placard to its side read 'Chuckle Egg', but the bell beneath wasn't working. Bernice turned to the sky-bike and asked its computer to remind her again why she was even bothering.

'When is a door not a door?' it asked in response.

'When it's a trap,' she muttered. 'Ah, well. Knock, knock!'

She stepped back and kicked; the door flew open with a splintering crunch and, without pause for thought, Benny hurled herself through.

'Who's there?' The costumed figure was on the far side of a featureless, square room with — Benny noticed happily — no other exits.

'Time for answers!'

'More questions first. Why can't you go hungry in the desert?' She hesitated. The Quiz leapt up, shrieking: 'Because of all the sand-which-is there!'

The roof opened. Benny threw herself backwards, but hit the door which she hadn't seen closing. She threw up her hands to protect herself from a sudden barrage of . . . hollow plastic balls? A seemingly infinite number of them, bouncing off her and piling up on the floor until, within a few seconds, she found herself hip deep in the things. 'This isn't sand!'

'I know, but it's more fun.' The Quiz dived into the plastic sea and Benny rushed to where she had last seen him. It was more difficult than she anticipated; the balls shifted beneath her and it felt like she was wading through water. By the time she regained her balance, the room was impossibly full of shelves containing all manner of junk

drinks cans, all swaying and leering at her and laughing until she could stand it no more.

Above the racket, she became aware of the rhythmic crunch-crunch of many feet and she stared up, wide-eyed, as a battalion of toy soldiers marched off a ledge above her and dropped with a high-pitched squeal of 'Wheeeeeee! Suddenly, they were all over her, shrieking and clawing, and she floundered again and went down.

She emerged to find the Quiz capering manically. 'What day of the year is an order to soldiers? March fourth!' She swung a fist at him but he ducked beneath it and vanished again. She dived forward and plunged both hands in after him, but they emerged with ten sets of clockwork teeth chattering away, one on each finger.

'If I hear one more joke out of you,' she shouted, shaking the appalling things free, 'you'll get the one about the nun, the punk and the bus driver. Then you'll be sorry!'

At that moment, she remembered the door and propelled herself back towards it. Good guess: she collided with her foe's body as he leapt up beside her she thoroughly enjoyed the surprise he betrayed in his body language.

'What's worse,' she said, 'than finding a worm in your apple?'

The Quiz looked bemused. 'Finding half a worm?'

'No — this!' She punched him across the face and he went down with a crash. She was on top of him before he could move.

'Why is a pub landlord like a captured criminal?' he moaned, dazed and defeated.

She clamped a set of fake teeth onto his nose. 'Don't ask,' she advised grimly.

The Doctor cried out as he woke, a gut-wrenched scream of painful effort. He felt his two hearts pumping and sweat coating his forehead. He was staring at the four bare walls and the high, barred window of what looked uncomfortably like a prison cell.

That wasn't where he should be.

For once, the Doctor didn't know where he was. He didn't 12

know how he had got here.

But he could still hear the echoes of his sixth self's accusing voice in his mind.

13

2

Good Dreams

They watched in silence as the planet shook.

They saw the fissures developing, great bloody gashes across the smooth skin of Arcalis. They imagined they could hear its people too, screaming as they realized their world was ending.

When the ultimate moment of the cataclysm came, both men gasped in awe. What had once been a lush green world was ripped unmercifully asunder before their eyes. Massive fragments of compacted rock whistled past the hovering TARDIS, so that it seemed they might smash through the scanner screen itself. For a moment, the dwindling fire of Arcalis's molten core remained, suspended, one last spurt of defiance before it blinked out like the lives it had supported.

The younger of the two spectators put a hand to his mouth and his cheeks coloured in embarrassment.

'Oops,' said Jason.

'This way!' Kat'lanna urged. She hurtled confidently through the dead city, ignoring Thruskarr's pained squeaks of protest.

He was following at a distance and his head jerked from side to side, as if expecting to find human snipers in the dark windows above. The crumbling masonry shifted in their wake and sent centuries-old dust pluming into clouds like trail markers. It never rained on Detrios. Nothing ever washed the grime away.

They reached the hut, at last; it was battered and holed, but still perhaps the soundest structure in this decimated settlement.

Kat forced the stiff door open, jumping to one side as Thruskarr threw himself past her and across the threshold. She followed to find him crouching in the centre of the building's one room, his eyes adjusting

slowly to the new light, seeking peril in every 14

shadow. Through a jagged hole in the tin roof, the Miracle cast its cold radiance, illuminating the broken chairs and the filthy mattress in an eerie blue-green. Kat felt safe here. Evidently, she was alone in that.

‘We’re on human territory,’ Thruskarr hissed. ‘Calm down,’

she said, flopping herself onto the mattress. ‘What’s all this

“human territory” stuff? There’s no such thing as far as I’m concerned.’

‘From your side of the fence, that is perhaps easier to believe.’

‘Besides, I told you, no one comes here. It’ll be years before the builders even get close. This is my secret place.’

‘It will still mean my death if I am caught,’ Thruskarr retorted. ‘Yours too, if you are found with a lizard.’

Kat’lanna pouted. ‘We can do what we like, they can’t stop us!’

‘We wish,’ said Thruskarr, with a sigh. He tested his weight on a dilapidated chair. It held. He sat back and regarded Kat through narrowed yellow eyes.

‘It was your idea to come here,’ she reminded him, letting a hint of bitterness filter into her voice.

‘I suggested we meet. I did not mean on human ground.’

‘Why does it have to be an issue?’

‘Because of human stubbornness, human greed and human fear.’

Kat bristled and spoke without thinking. ‘Your lot started it!’

‘Twelve generations ago!’ Thruskarr spat.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t —’

‘It does not matter.’ The lizard man’s heavy brow folded into a frown. ‘I just believed you were different, that is all.’

That hurt Kat’lanna, more than almost anything else he could have

said. She fixed sad round eyes upon him, but he avoided the look and stared down at his own feet instead. A long silence followed and the yard of rotten planking between them seemed to stretch much further.

Kat crossed that infinite distance first. She crouched down beside Thruskarr and rested a gentle hand on his heavily padded 15

shoulder. ‘Look - it’s entirely possible that, after tomorrow, we might never . . . see each other again.’

Thruskarr looked up, and when their eyes met, Kat felt her own soul being drawn irresistibly into the depths of her friend’s gaze. ‘Or perhaps,’ he said softly, ‘such meetings might be made easier.’

She said nothing. In his eyes, she saw her thoughts reflected: her longing, her anger, her pain, all intensified. The moment didn’t seem real. But it felt good.

They kissed then, as if that was the most natural thing to do: as if neither of them had any choice in their actions. And, to a certain extent, that was true. In one endless moment, a new world had beckoned to them: a dangerous world, full of terrifying risks and consequences — but of beautiful rewards too. It was a world of which nobody on Detrios had dared dream. But they were daring now.

And their dream, Kat realized, was a good one.

Jason had been searching for the comics section in the TARDIS

library. He hadn’t found it, but he did enjoy playing with the floating discs, which propelled him at breath-taking speed to whichever shelf he wished to peruse. Sometimes, he hardly dared touch the books, lest they vanish beneath his fingertips and reveal all this to be a cruel illusion.

As he skipped lightly back to the floor, he saw that he had a visitor. It was the tabby tom-cat he had discovered that morning and dubbed ‘Power Puss’ as befitted a true adventurer’s mascot.

It looked uncomfortable in its flowing blue cape and domino mask.

‘Is this all you expected?’ the cat asked.

‘It’s better!’ enthused Jason. ‘It’s . . .’ He gazed around in wonder. ‘Bigger, for a start.’

‘Of course, the TARDIS is —’

‘Dimensionally transcendental. I know, Doctor Who-ever-He-Is told me that.’

‘I was going to say “bigger on the inside than the outside”.’

Jason laughed. ‘I keep thinking I’m going to wake up.’ He looked into the cat’s green eyes and a hint of uncertainty 16

shadowed his features. ‘I’m not going to, am I?’

‘Not unless you want to.’

Jason thought about that. ‘I don’t,’ he said.

‘Well, then.’ The cat turned away and sniffed at one of the lower shelves nonchalantly. ‘So, what brings you out here this late? You’re a long way from the living quarters.’

‘I know,’ said Jason. ‘I couldn’t sleep. There was a bit of unpleasantness before. We accidentally blew a planet up.’

‘Oh dear.’

‘Well, it was the Trods’ fault really. They’d built this giant megatomic nuclear device, you see, and they were blackmailing

__’

‘You don’t need to explain,’ Power Puss cut in. ‘It all sounds unfortunate to be sure, but I expect you’ve learnt from the experience.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Jason, nodding vigorously. A sly smile spread across his face. ‘And it was kind of fun. I mean, we beat the Trods after all. They were still on Arcalis when it blew. I don’t expect they’ll get out of that in a hurry.’ His attention was taken by a row of books behind him. Pulp crime fiction from the United States, early twentieth century. How come he hadn’t noticed them before?

‘You see? There’s always a bright side. What did your new friend think?’

‘He seemed a bit bothered at first,’ mused Jason. He pulled out a book and flicked through it. It was almost, he thought, as if the TARDIS had anticipated his tastes and placed the novels in reach. ‘Now, I think he’s forgotten about it. I expect he’s more concerned with our

mission.'

'Oh yes?'

'You remember how he caught his arch-enemy this morning?'

'You have told me,' the cat said. 'An evil megalomaniac, I believe, determined to destroy you.'

'That's right. But he can't now. We took him to Galactic Prison this afternoon.'

'It sounds very dangerous.'

'Oh, not really. Well, I wasn't here actually, not for the fight 17

itself.' Jason put the book back, deciding he liked the televised version better. 'But I'm sure I'd have been okay, I mean I'm sorry I missed it. I'm hoping to be in on the next big adventure.'

He turned, and frowned when he saw that the cat was no longer in sight. He wondered when it had left.

'Be careful what you wish for,' its voice purred, as if the animal had not moved but rather become invisible. 'In your case, it might well happen.'

Kat'lanna spoilt the moment.

She felt the cold, clammy texture of Thruskarr's scales; she realized exactly what she was doing; she flinched involuntarily; and the hurt returned to his eyes.

'Go home,' he told her, his voice low, his back turned.

'No!'

'You never wanted this, Kat. You don't want anything from me. Just an opportunity to defy your family and your rulers, to show how rebellious and free-thinking you are by flirting with a

"slimy lizard".'

Kat shook her head, tears welling. She couldn't say anything.

His back was an impenetrable barrier, the dusty blue of his soldier's uniform masking a body made erect and immobile by the strength of

resolution.

‘Go home,’ Thruskarr said again. He left in silence and, still speechless, Kat made no move to stop him.

For a long time after Thruskarr had gone, she stared unseeingly at the closed door of the hut. She wondered if what he had said might just be true. She didn’t want to go home that night.

She lay back on the mattress and stared up through the hole and grieved at the mess that her life had become. The Miracle was directly overheard, hanging impossibly, alone in the black sky. Its crystal peaks twinkled with its own internal light and Kat still thought it was the most wonderful thing she had ever seen.

The Miracle had brought light to her planet. It had brought a vital source of power and provided oxygen, allowing the Detrians to leave their shelters. It had ended the centuries-long 18

Great Darkness and brought new life to those who had thought themselves doomed.

But it had brought little heat. The Detrians were still suffering

— and the cold-blooded lizard people especially so. They couldn’t step onto the surface without thick layers of additional clothing, and even then the temperature sapped their strength and made them vulnerable to human enemies. ‘This is your Miracle, not ours,’ Thruskarr had once said. ‘It doesn’t help my people.’

Kat gazed up at the crystal tonight and wondered again where it had come from. The scientists had been unable to explain it.

Some still worked on the problem, whilst others had long since torn up their doctorates and joined Enros’s Cult of the Undying.

She was unconvinced by either school of thought. But she hoped that, whatever the origins of the construct, it should not prove to be unique.

Kat’lanna had already seen one Miracle come to Detrios.

Now, more than ever, it needed another.

For some, at least, that second Miracle might just have arrived.

It manifested itself elsewhere on the planet, in a place where bright

lights shone on blue water and reflected off crystal and gold trim; where the squalor of the lizards' quarter and the poverty of Kat's home were but statistics to be bandied by those who remained unaffected. For this was the Citadel, and here the future lay. For those who could afford one.

Darnak was a low-level politician, entrusted with a small measure of responsibility but no more than was good for him. His eyes were sparkling and he rubbed his pudgy hands together with glee as he took in the incongruous sight by the marble fountain.

'And you say this thing just . . . appeared?' he asked the Captain of the Guard for the seventh time. The answer was positive, and thus no different to the first six. Darnak didn't hear it.

His mind had taken off on one of its frequent flights of fancy.

He was dreaming of what the Superior — or even, dare he hope, the Undying One? — might say to him when it became known that his discovery had brought Detrios's salvation. He certainly wouldn't find himself on call for the night-shift again!

19

To Darnak, this blue box, with its indecipherable but obviously alien lettering, spelt 'Promotion Prospects' with two capital Ps.

When Kat slept, she lived in a different place.

The crystal still glittered above, but its surface was shot through with red and yellow and it radiated glorious warmth in which the humans and the lizards basked side by side. The heat evaporated the stagnant oceans; great white clouds formed, nudged across the sky by a gentle, fresh breeze. It started to rain and flowers sprouted in the desolate ruins of the Old Time.

A fierce crack shook her from her doze. She was of the mattress in seconds, springing into a defensive posture. There was no need for alarm. Her visitor — who had barged open the hut's uncooperative door — was Mortannis, her brother. The one she trusted, the one she had told about this place. The only one who hadn't rejected her. Even so, she was glad that Thruskarr had left.

'You startled me,' she said, relaxing slightly though her body was still shaking.

‘Sorry. I thought you might be here. There’s an emergency meeting.’

‘What, now?’

‘As soon as we can assemble. We need to be ready.’ Kat nodded, her heart pounding. Mortannis could always excite her like this. He was not much older than her, but she admired him none the less. She admired his courage, his strength and his resolve; the way in which he’d determined the course of his own life, walked out on the family and pulled the rebel group together. He was a natural leader, inspiring hope in his followers despite the hopelessness of their situation. He was everything they could want from a hero. He was muscular, upright, square jawed . . . and black.

Their grandmother had had skin like Mort’s. Black like obsidian; smooth, sleek and glossy. Kat’s parents had claimed they could see their reflections in grandma’s skin, and despite the exaggeration of such claims, there was no hiding one fact: that, with each generation spent underground, the Detrian 20

humans had become paler, weaker and smaller. Mortannis, almost a throwback to the Old Time, had become the family’s prodigal son. Kat’lanna, quite the whitest child ever born, was scorned. She had hated her brother for that, resenting the attention he received at her expense. But when she had left her parents through necessity, he had followed by choice, and she had loved him since.

He was halfway through the door now, but Kat stopped him with a shout. ‘You can’t go without telling me. What’s happening?’

‘It’s been brought forward,’ Mort threw back over his shoulder. ‘The lizards are gathering now, to attack at dawn. I’ll tell you the rest later.’

He was gone then, but his words had pierced Kat’s stomach like ice shards. The lizards were about to make their final stand, fight their last battle. And Kat knew that Thruskarr, young rebellious Thruskarr, would be amongst them.

She felt cold as she sank back onto the mattress, pulling her knees to her chest. She ran her long fingers over the smooth dome of her head, as though that could calm the cyclone of thoughts raging within. And, although Kat was no religious woman, she offered a small prayer to the Miracle: that, from this long-augured conflict, some good might come. That, somehow, the battle might serve to end the tension and hostilities on Detrios forever.

Kat thought of the place in her mind: that world of heat and rain and flowers and peace. She prayed that today's events might help bring that world into existence.

But Kat'lanna knew that was only a dream.

Fairly shaking with pent-up anticipation, Darnak led his two honoured guests back into the fountain square. 'And that, my friends, brings us full circle. Of course, we only started building once the Great Darkness ended and we reclaimed the surface.

The Citadel is not yet even half completed.'

The shorter, older man nodded graciously. 'I'm sure it will be even more splendid when it is.'

The other seemed oblivious. He was gazing about him, his 21

eyes wide with wonder. A strange one, this Jason: he seemed to be a young adult, and yet he was dressed in short pants and a black jacket, and he acted as if he were half his physical age.

Well, Darnak thought, perhaps these people matured slowly.

They were certainly alien, after all; their skin tones betrayed that. It seemed fitting that, after centuries of myth, the first offworld visitors to Detrios since before the Great Darkness should be, quite literally, 'little pink men'.

'Well,' said the first man, clapping his hands together, 'thanks for the guided tour. It was interesting.'

Darnak breathed in sharply, his imagined accolades endangered. 'But . . . you could surely stay a while, Doctor . . .

erm, Doctor . . . ?' What was his confounded name again?

'I'm afraid not. We have a mission to complete, right Jason?

Dangerous galactic criminals to catch. In fact, we came here quite by accident.'

Darnak laughed uneasily. 'Of course. No dangerous criminals here, eh?' The stranger laughed with him, then made a move for the blue box. Darnak panicked and grabbed his hand without thinking. 'However,' he said, voice measured, mind racing, 'we do have problems of a different nature.'

‘Oh?’

‘Rampaging lizard men, no less.’

‘I’m not sure we can help.’

‘No, wait!’ The unexpected interruption came from Jason, suddenly interested. ‘Let’s hear more.’

‘We do have work to do,’ his companion reminded him sternly.

‘But this is what I joined you for!’ said Jason. ‘Hideous monsters, innocent aliens, hopeless situations, escape plans . . .’

Darnak nodded enthusiastically. ‘I can promise all that!’

‘We must help!’ Jason said firmly. ‘It’ll only take a couple of hours, won’t it?’

‘Okay,’ his colleague finally consented. ‘If you feel that strongly, we’ll stay. But only until the lizards are dead.’

Darnak grinned like a lunatic and wondered whether the Vice-Head of Operations post had been filled yet.

22

3

Bad Dreams (2)

Dawn was approaching.

Outside, of course, it wouldn’t be marked. The Miracle stood firm, shining on the settled portion of Detrios regardless of the dictates of time. Inside, however — in the underground cities the standard forty-segment day of the Old Sun would be observed. The lights of the indoor streets would gradually fade up to white. The Day of Reckoning would begin.

On the plains, a faint breeze was beginning to blow stronger.

Kat blinked specks from her eyes and focused again on the Citadel, which rose from the hillside in the mid-distance. White walls and gleaming spires, to hold back the grey dunes; they couldn’t have built a more obvious monument to privilege if they’d tried.

It had taken so long to get this far.

The lizards were massing in the valley below her. Most wore the blue uniforms of the outlawed Reptilian Liberation Movement. Long, prehensile tails flicked nervously; lipless mouths drew back to reveal razor teeth and thin tongues, slavering in anticipation. Kat shivered, remembering the proud military background of this suddenly alien race. She wondered if they were doing the right thing.

She saw Thruskarr in the mêlée and moved instinctively towards him. But the crowd shifted and he was gone. Mortannis emerged instead and took his sister's shoulder, looking her in the eyes, his expression serious.

'I want you to know,' he said, 'if anything happens today —'

She moved his hand and nodded awkwardly. 'I know.'

He seemed to accept that. He looked at the gathering troops and Kat saw he was worried. Mortannis would never have made 23

anyone else aware of that. 'There aren't many, are there?'

'There's a hundred or more.' she said, trying to lighten his spirits. 'And they are the stronger race.'

Mort nodded. But he wasn't convinced. Kat knew he was speaking to reassure himself. 'The element of surprise, that's the main thing. If they storm the Citadel whilst the rulers are sleeping, occupy it before the state thugs can arrive . . .'

'And with the rebels running interference for them, what can go wrong?'

Mortannis smiled at her enthusiasm. 'Let's hope we don't find out.'

A creeping mist hovered over black water, restricting distance vision and creating fuzzy orange patterns from the fading radiance of the rad-globes. The Undertown was a numbingly familiar place to be: a world of poverty and despair, the festering foundations over which Earth's empire was built.

Chris Cwej had not been sorry to say goodbye to it. He wasn't at all pleased to be back.

With a yell and a dull crump of blaster fire, the wiry form of his

partner crashed through the haze and vaulted into the idling flitter. ‘Move it!’ Chris didn’t need telling. He pulled the open-topped vehicle into a steep climb, heading almost suicidally for a narrow gap between two hovering Overcity buildings. ‘Not up there,’ squeaked Roz, breath stolen by the acceleration.

‘Towards them!’

‘Sorry.’ Chris banked sharply, pointing the craft down and narrowly missing a jutting walkway as he levelled out a few feet above the water. ‘This place seems smaller.’

‘It hasn’t been that long,’ snapped Roz. ‘Eyes open, bogies ahead!’

They were rearing up from the shadows, appearing out of unexpected nooks: muscled soldiers in heavy combat armour, firing nightmare science-fiction weapons, sending thin lasers crackling past him in a confining criss-cross pattern. Chris jerked the control stick from one side to another and tried to run the deadly, fast-as-light gauntlet, knowing that only dumb luck was keeping him alive. Dumb luck and Roz Forrester.

24

She stood upright in her seat, loosing blast after crippling blast at random targets through the subterranean gloom. There were so many that even she couldn’t miss them all, and where her shots impacted, terrified men leapt whimpering for cover. In a few seconds they were through and Roz was blowing imaginary smoke from her gun muzzle. ‘Only the big one to go, then this call’s wrapped up. Take the next turning but one left.’

Chris obeyed instinctively, but the direction led him to an area which he had not seen before. The mist seemed denser and he eased off the power, barely able to see three metres ahead for obstructions. ‘I thought you were supposed to be the speed freak,’ said Roz with irritation. ‘Don’t slow down now, we’re on top of it.’

‘I’m not sure —’ Chris caught something in his throat and choked. A strong smell, worse than the customary dank odours of the Undertown, assailed his nostrils and coaxed water from his eyes. Ammonia and blood. His neck hairs were standing rigid; the flesh beneath was tingling.

The monster came at them from nowhere. A giant insect, horribly mutated. Black, double-jointed legs like stanchions reached out to

ensnare them. Chris recoiled from their coarse hairs, matted and wet with the lifeblood of fresh victims. With a gurgle of fear he brought the flitter round, upsetting his partner's balance so that her carefully aimed shot ricocheted off a moss-covered wall. 'What the hell are you doing?'

'You can't seriously fight that!' Six yellow globe eyes glared from beneath a thick carapace and Chris averted his gaze, afraid they might mesmerize him, draw him into the creature's embrace.

'Too right,' she said. 'It's our job, remember.' She was already clambering out of the flitter and, too late to stop her, Chris saw what she intended.

'No!'

There was nothing he could do. With a wet smack, Roz's body hit the water.

'I'm sorry, Politik Darnak, but the Superior is sleeping.' The administrator spoke with affected preciseness, allowing her 25

voice to betray just the right measure of condescension. 'And I'm sure you know that she mustn't be disturbed for anything less than a purple or green-grade emergency.'

Darnak gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to punch that segment of the commu-screen on which the woman's sneer was displayed. 'I'm telling you,' he insisted, 'it's important. I wouldn't be calling this late if it wasn't!'

'Is it a purple or green-grade emergency?'

'Well, no, but —'

'Then I cannot disturb the Superior. I suggest you wait the few remaining time segments until light-on, then call again.'

The administrator reached out and flicked a switch. The screen went blank. Darnak gave in to temptation and thumped it.

Sucking his bruised knuckles ruefully, he turned back to his visitors. He was shocked to see how much of a mess the older man had already made on his office floor. All manner of paraphernalia, from nails to coat-hangers to . . . was that a jack-in-the-box? . . . lay tangled in the white fibres of the deep pile carpet. The alien was beginning to pull

some of the objects together, to form the most outlandish and asymmetrical contraption that Darnak had ever seen.

The young man — Jason — was staring, amused by his outburst. ‘Damn bureaucrats!’ he spat, as some sort of justification.

‘Never mind,’ said Jason. ‘When your President person wakes up, he’ll find you’ve solved the lizard monster problem by yourself.’

‘That’s right.’ The rumbling tones of Jason’s friend drifted up from behind the desk. The man himself followed, jumping to his feet and grinning broadly. ‘In fact, I think it better the Superior doesn’t know about us at all. Alien visitations can play havoc with planetary politics, I often find.’

Darnak frowned, weighing up the pros and cons of that argument. The main pro, of course, was that he would be able to take all credit for the visitors’ work.

Then Jason interrupted his train of thought. ‘Well? Aren’t you going to look at what we’ve done?’

‘Done?’ Darnak looked, but all he could see was Jason hoisting up that jack-in-the-box, of all things, into which the older man’s construction had apparently been forced. The only external difference was that a large red plunger had been attached to the thing’s lid with sellotape.

The older man smiled, took the device from Jason and turned it so that Darnak could see the letters, picked out in red felt-tip, on one of the box’s vertical surfaces: ACME LIZARD-MONSTER ERADICATION DEVICE.

Darnak turned pale and was suddenly glad he hadn’t woken the Superior after all.

Roz was out of sight, already swallowed up by black water and the hungry fog. Chris cursed her for her mindless bravado. He had to turn back, despite the awful feeling that to do so was to sacrifice his life. But as he guided the flitter, without warning, something sharp and painful whipped across his eyes and Chris cried out as he realized that one of the insect’s flailing tendrils had found him.

He was blinded. His face was an itching mess, hot tears rolling down his cheeks. He couldn’t help now, all he could do was get out or be

killed. He silently wished his partner luck, then gunned the engines and retreated as fast as the protesting vehicle would allow. If he could get his information to the Adjudicator Secular, perhaps he could do something . . .

He found the turning, straining to see through one swollen, half-closed eye. He banked right and caught his breath as the ground rose sharply beneath him and decrepit buildings leaned in and cut down his manoeuvring space on both sides. The tunnels were definitely shrinking!

A shrill chirruping burst out too close for comfort, and Chris put his foot down and began to mouth a prayer that they might both survive this blighted mission.

He was halfway through the first line when the flitter collided head-on with a wall. An explosion of colour slammed sickeningly into his closed eyelids. Then warm blackness reached out to enshroud his thoughts.

27

Kat'lanna hugged herself against the growing cold and made a token wish that she'd been assigned to something more productive. At other times, she had been more annoyed by Mort's insistence on keeping her away from danger — and thus, from action. Today, she felt almost too numb to care.

She looked down at the placard by her side. Mort had left it for her; one of his people had painted it in crooked blue letters on a white background of torn cloth. EQUAL RIGHTS FOR

ALL. Their lifelong struggle, and the lizards' too. Both races united against the selfish and privileged human over-caste.

The hand-held communicator on Kat's belt squawked. She grabbed it and almost dropped the makeshift device, her hands were shaking so. Her voice too. 'Receiving. Yes?'

Her brother's voice erupted in a burst of static. 'Now!' One simple word, so much meaning behind it. Mortannis's rebels had crossed the security blockade and reached the power lines.

They would sever them in one segment's time, just as the Citadel's occupiers were beginning to respond to their empire's fall. More rebels were positioned by the front of that great marble edifice; their

demonstration would begin now, distracting the authorities with painted and chanted slogans of defiance. As soon as she confirmed to Mortannis that the lizard attack had begun, Kat would be joining them, and him, at that front.

The reptile leader had overheard Mort's message. He looked to Kat, politely waiting for her to relay the signal. She couldn't talk. She just nodded, and the soldier's lips pulled into a leering smile. A tense silence spread through the armoured ranks and two hundred yellow slit eyes turned expectantly upon their commander.

'For freedom!' he yelled, as he punched the sky. 'And equality!'

The assembled lizards roared: a bloodcurdling outburst of savage and long-repressed determination. Kat'lanna, suddenly frightened, shrank back into the dust and cast about longingly for a sight of Thruskarr.

The attacking army surged forward, crested the hill and set 28

the human Citadel in their malevolent sights.

'I don't know why you're being so funny about it!' Jason stormed. 'I mean, read the label: it's obvious what it does!'

Darnak read the label again. He still didn't believe it.

'You can't tell me that piece of junk is going to wipe out the lizard problem overnight,' he protested.

'Why ever not, Politik Darnak?' the older man asked sweetly.

'We are talking about alien technology, are we not? How much do you know about that subject anyway?'

'Well, nothing. But —'

'There you are then.' He proffered the box once more. 'I think it should be up to you to operate the device, don't you?

It's quite a simple process.'

Darnak looked at the red plastic plunger and nodded dumbly.

'Well?' said Jason. Darnak didn't move.

'I thought you said there were rumours of an imminent lizard assault on the Citadel. The Superior must be worried!'

Jason nodded encouragingly. ‘I bet he’d be grateful if he woke up and found the monsters gone.’

‘She,’ Darnak corrected him, absent-mindedly. He was nodding again, but more because he couldn’t think of anything to say than for any more communicative reason. The visitors looked at him expectantly and he realized that a decision had to be made. His whole future, he thought uncomfortably, lay ahead of him. One way or another.

Darnak reached out for the box.

Then he withdrew his hand. He was beginning to sweat. ‘No, I’ll talk to the Superior first. In the morning.’ He caught Jason’s disapproving glare. ‘It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s . . . I mean . . . a decision like this, it can’t be taken lightly.’

Jason sighed. Then he reached forward and snatched the device impatiently. ‘Let me do it!’

He depressed the plunger.

Chris woke with a start and doubled over, coughing foul-tasting water from his mouth and nose. For a second, he thought he had been dreaming. But he was still in the Undertown, lying half-submerged in its brackish water, head aching from where he 29

had hit it against the wall. The shattered pieces of his flitter lay about him, drifting on the sluggish tide. There was no hope of repair; he was on foot from now on. But if he could reach the Overcity . . .

A shadow fell across the tunnel wall and Chris smelt ammonia again. He clambered to his feet, waded to the water’s edge and tried to pull himself out. His limbs were too heavy to respond, but somehow he knew that something terrible was coming his way and that gave him the strength to succeed.

The stench had grown to almost unbearable proportions by the time Chris stood, shaking and dripping, on the walkway.

This part of the Undertown was strange to him and he couldn’t work out how he had got here. He started to run blindly, shadows dancing and clawing at his face. He turned twice and let off blaster shots, but they ricocheted uselessly from derelict buildings and Chris chided himself for over-reacting. He sprinted on, hearing only his own laboured breathing and the moist slap of his shoes. His heart rose when he finally saw the null-gray shaft, a temptingly short way ahead.

He changed course, fingers crossed, but something leapt from the darkness between him and it. Something a lot like a smaller, more mobile version of the insect that had . . . killed Roz Forrester.

He yelled and jumped back, bringing up his gun. But the monster sprang, feelers probing for his neck. Chris lashed out and knocked it to one side, losing his balance and taking a dive back into the water. The monster didn't seem too willing to follow; it waved its mandibles and emitted a frustrated clicking as Chris floundered away through the filthy liquid. He steadied himself against the wall of the far bank and shot at it. The thing squeaked and reeled beneath his blaster fire, but it took five direct hits before it fell. To Chris's alarm, it toppled the wrong way. Its steaming corpse floated towards him on the water and he scrambled onto dry land as fast as his battered body would allow, There was no point heading for the shaft now: at least six insects had scuttled from hiding and were blocking his route.

He would have to find an alternative means of egress.

Chris turned to run again, but someone was behind him, He 30

pulled up his weapon, then let out a squeal of relief when he saw that it was Roz. 'Thank God, I thought you were . . . I mean, you . . .' She didn't look pleased to see him. Her gun was aimed at his chest. 'What . . . what's wrong?' he asked uncertainly. She swung her right arm and her weapon cracked against his head, drawing blood. Chris stumbled backwards, almost taking a third plunge. 'What —?' His erstwhile colleague silenced him with another blow, This time he hit the floor, and Roz stood astride his body, a contemptuous sneer distorting her face.

'You left me to die, you coward! I'll kill you for that!'

The air was electrically charged and laden with blood and fire.

The lizards were screaming and dying, thick clouds of dust exploding as their heavy, armoured bodies toppled face-first into the grime.

Kat'lanna screamed too, fists pressed against her temples until it felt like her head would bleed. She was caught in the dead centre of the carnage, fighting the urge to vomit, trying to make some sense of this unheralded apocalypse. Her mind kept returning inexorably to Thruskarr and she stumbled through the ranks of the dead and dying, yelling for him but knowing that the harsh wind was tearing the name from her throat unheard.

When the sickening sights and the cacophonic sounds of death were too much for her, Kat fell to her knees and cradled her head in her arms, whimpering. She thought of the kind, gentle, happy world that existed only in her mind and she prayed for the end of this nightmare but knew that it could never end now.

There was no point in having good dreams any more.

31

4

Who's Been Sleeping . . .

'Okay,' Bernice said, sitting astride the Quiz's torso and resting a restraining arm against her fallen enemy's throat. 'My turn!

I've got a question for you: who are you? Who lurks under that ridiculous head covering?'

The Quiz shifted uncomfortably in the ball pool. 'You mean you can't guess?'

'Oh yes, I probably can. Some Freudian manifestation of my own repressed emotions and desires, I'll just bet.'

'You don't think I'm the butler then?'

Benny laughed hollowly. 'My father, perhaps. Or the Doctor

— he's the biggest obsessive games player I know.'

'Doctor, Doctor, I'm feeling beside myself.'

Benny's face clouded and she snapped: 'Oh, bugger it!' She ripped off the Quiz's silver mask and revealed, as expected, the grinning features of Professor Bernice Summerfield. 'Why is it that everyone around here turns out to be me?'

'Who else is such an incorrigible show-off?' her doppelgänger asked. 1 kept you coming in the right direction, didn't I?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Benny snarled.

'What's more, when I've woken up and I'm recording this experience in my diary — in a slightly amended form to make myself look better, of course — I, quite frankly, won't give a toss.'

There was silence after that little outburst. When a few seconds had elapsed, her double asked: Is that it?'

'Yes, I feel much better now, thank you.'

'Pretty confident, aren't you?'

'You're the one with my elbow planted in your oesophagus.

32

'About waking up, I mean.'

Bernice sighed. 'Can't I assume you're here to tell rile how?'

The other Benny rolled her eyes in a long-suffering manner.

'I'm supposed to represent your subconscious, woman, How obvious do you want it?'

'Try "bloody"!'

The unmasked Quiz sighed and looked deliberately down at her own chest. Benny tensed and steadied her elbow, prepared for a diversionary ploy. Only then did she allow her eyes to flick briefly downward. And again, her gaze resting longer this second time, a mixture of incredulity and outright annoyance spreading over her features.

The red question mark on the Quiz's costume was not, as it seemed from a distance, solid. Rather, it was picked out by thin block letters which, starting from the top and curving towards the point, read:

TAKE THE PILL, YOU STUPID BITCH!

Benny frowned and, sensing that her captive would make no further move, she slackened her hold and patted her coveralls down. She found it in the front left pocket: a large white disc, so cumbersome that she couldn't believe she hadn't felt it before.

She inspected the pill and nodded ruefully at the words chiselled onto its surface: WAKING TABLET.

It was too big to swallow, but she sensed the thing to do was to pop it in her mouth anyway. It fitted surprisingly well and disintegrated on her tongue. She felt like a cloud of hot dust had drifted up her nostrils and a sticky, tingling sensation enveloped her larynx and slid into her

stomach.

Without warning, Metro City vanished.

Chris looked up into Forrester's hard brown eyes, filled with uncustomary hatred. He felt he was about to burst into tears. 'I .

. . didn't know what . . . We should have gone for help, I said so, I . . . I thought you were dead!'

Her expression was resolute. She brought up the gun again.

'You know what I had to do to my last partner, don't you Chris?' He nodded dumbly, but she told him anyway. 'He went bad on me and I had to punish him.' She flipped the gun's 33

setting to 'kill' with what seemed like a deliberately orchestrated click. 'Now, my definition of "bad" is leaving a fellow officer to die. I hoped I wouldn't have to do this again.'

Chris tried to crawl away, to do something productive, but he was paralysed. He felt something hard and round in his right hand, but he didn't know what it was. 'Come on Roz,' he implored, his breathing hard, voice trembling, 'you're not serious about this. I mean, after all we've been —'

'No use pleading!'

She was really going to do it. 'We're supposed to be friends!'

'You're no friend of mine, you backstabber!'

The end of the barrel was an inch from his nose. He began to panic. There was nothing to lose. ' *I love you*!' Chris screamed, the confession torn unwillingly from his heart and hanging accusingly between them.

She pulled away and hesitated, just for a moment.

Chris was blinded by tears and his cheeks were burning with the embarrassment of his outburst, but he knew that this might be his only chance. He lashed out with his feet and, luckily, took Roz's legs from under her. She fell. Chris scrambled up, leapt over her and ran.

'You can't escape me!' The voice was already far behind him, echoing around the tunnels as though she was everywhere at once. He didn't look back.

There was another insect thing on the next walkway. Without stopping to think, he leapt into the water and waded across instead. He took a pot-shot at the monster as it leaned over the safety rail, its legs thrashing in frustration. The blast did no physical harm, but it made Chris feel better. Then he was on solid ground again, heading towards the null-gray shaft which would finally take him away from this nightmare. Through those heart-bursting, unbearably extended seconds, he expected nothing more than to see some terrible creature step out before him, blocking his salvation. No such thing happened.

Chris hit the back wall of the shaft panting, allowing his over-exerted body to collapse against it. He realized some. thing was wrong as he reached the floor. He wasn't rising. The anti-gray 34

unit wasn't functional.

Trapped in the confined space, Chris jumped to his feet alertly. Too late. Roz was in the doorway, weapon aimed. A bolt struck his shoulder, twisting him and slamming him back into the wall. He hit the ground again with a lurch of his stomach and the world began to slip away a second time.

It was entirely as a reflex action that Chris Cwej, in his last second of consciousness, put the tablet into his mouth.

'I need two volunteers,' the Doctor had said, 'for a potentially dangerous mission.' Bernice remembered, smiling. How nice of him to ask for once. 'I want Benny to be one. She's had some limited experience with this sort of problem. Who else?' She had rolled her eyes then, although she didn't mind really.

She was standing now in an uncomfortably shallow niche, which had been scooped out of a sheer glacial wall. Before her, a chasm beckoned, stretching endlessly in all directions.

Particularly, it seemed, downwards. She inched back from the vertiginous drop, shivering, her eyes closed. Her mind was strangely numb but she could feel broken fragments of memory assembling themselves into a fairly coherent picture.

'Okay, Doctor, what's the scoop this time?'

'A simple repair job.'

'On the TARDIS?'

‘No. The universe.’

‘Aha. And I’ll just bet the guarantee’s expired.’

The sky-bike was crammed into the space with her. It had changed its shape to a more spartan, functional assemblage of white tubing. A skimmer. Benny liked the old model better.

Still, there was no computer now; that was some consolation.

She wondered if the vehicle had been responsible for lifting her here, but instinctively she knew that that was not the case.

The crystalline surface of the niche’s back wall was hard, sharp and cold, yet it receded at her cautious touch as if whatever mountain she was trapped in was malleable to her very will. It was in this way, cocooned by dreams and half-realities, that Benny realized she had arrived. Straight through what seemed to be solid matter.

35

‘A breach has opened,’ the Doctor had explained to his three companions. ‘A semi-natural thing, a fluke accident, perhaps caused by the Timewyrm or by the Monk’s machinations with the timestream. Maybe even Gabriel and Tanith created it as a by-product of their existence. That doesn’t matter. What does is that this phenomenon may have serious repercussions. It has created a gateway between our own reality and a fictional sub-dimension.’

Roz had scoffed at that apparently nonsensical idea. Chris had frowned and awaited the Doctor’s further information. Bernice had found the concept both a realistic and a chilling one. In answer to her worried question, the Doctor had confirmed that, yes, this alien realm was the one which had once housed that mysterious and deadly place, the Land of Fiction. ‘If we don’t rectify this fault, the physical laws we know may change beyond recognition.’

‘If I’m going to wind up facing Doctor Doom again,’ she had said, ‘you can forget it.’ She hadn’t meant that either.

She remembered the generator and felt for it in the pockets of her coveralls. It was there all right, lending some measure of tangible credence to her still hazy recollections. The read-out on the small green box’s flat display told Benny that she had arrived here with six minutes to spare. It told her that Chris was a worrying eight hundred metres from his destination. It told her nothing about the Doctor.

‘The transdimensional rift has formed its own protective barrier: a large, solid crystal, the size of a small moon. It’s composed entirely of fictional energy and is thus immune to analysis and to most forms of attack. Even the TARDIS can’t land within its mass. Its one weakness is the intelligent mind.

With that, we can sculpt its raw material into an infinite variety of forms. We can make the crystal open for us, penetrate to its heart and set up a force field around the original breach.’

A simple enough plan, Bernice had thought. Three people, three field generators. Each to enter the crystal from separate points on its surface. The fictional forces would besiege them with whatever could be plucked from their minds, but with the 36

help of a little hypnotic suggestion and a powerful mindblocking drug taken at a crucial moment, they could feasibly reach the centre. Once there, they could operate the generators simultaneously, to form an impenetrable field which Roz, stationed in the TARDIS, could control. Contract the field and, as the Doctor had put it, *pow!* The energy would be forced back to where it had come from, the leak plugged.

Not quite so simple in practice. Already, Benny could see shapes hanging over the chasm. They were insubstantial, like smoke phantoms on the wind, but she was positive she had seen her own face, briefly, and her father’s. She was at the heart of the crystal and the gap before her was roiling with the substance of an unfamiliar plane. It had seemed invisible before only because there had been nothing to dictate its form. With the Doctor’s drug beginning to wear off, Bernice could feel her every thought threatening to become real again.

It occurred to her momentarily that, without a guiding intellect, there was no way the crystal itself should have formed.

She dismissed that notion. It was comparatively unimportant now.

The Doctor had warned against the medical danger of taking two tablets. He had only provided one. Benny’s time in this place was limited and her journey back would no doubt be as unpleasant as the one here.

If her colleagues didn’t appear soon, it would also be in vain.

Their mission couldn’t be completed.

Chris was beginning to feel like a character in a bad sci-fi anthology series: each time he thought he'd woken up, he found himself dreaming all over again. This time, he was encased in some form of clear crystal, like a fly in amber. There were dry tears on his cheeks, his shoulder and head hurt like hell and he was no longer sure if Roz was dead or alive — or even if he'd humiliated himself before her as he feared he had. But as he fought back a claustrophobia-induced panic at his situation, the memories of what he recognized as reality began to filter into his mind, and this at least gave him some form of perspective.

He was in trouble. That much he knew. He remembered the 37

Doctor's briefing, recalling his ire rising when Roz told him that she was the logical candidate for the job. They had tossed a coin for it in the end, Chris participating for all the wrong reasons. To prove himself, to look good in front of the others.

Where had that got him?

Chris concentrated and the crystal shrank back, leaving him in a small hollow large enough to stand in and move around a little. 'No problem, Doctor,' he remembered joking. 'I'll dream of fluffy bunnies and pink marshmallows.' Yeah, right. And not, for instance, of marauding insectoid monsters and a partner who . . .

Best not to think about it.

Chris pulled the generator from his coverall pocket. His heart sank as he checked it. Eight hundred metres from the crystal's centre. Bernice, he saw, was there already; she'd be getting impatient. And he had used his mindblocker. He was on borrowed time.

Chris didn't know whether, without his skimmer, he could reach the centre before the dreamscape asserted itself again.

That thought worried him. His throbbing shoulder testified to the fact that — taken from his own fantasies though it may be

— the nightmare world was a very real and dangerous place.

Perhaps he'd dream of fluffy bunnies this time?

Seconds ticked by, marked by the beading of sweat on his forehead. He didn't dare go forward, but he was reluctant to admit defeat too. He didn't want to go back.

Chris's dilemma was settled in a second. A horribly familiar smell wafted across his nostrils and set his nasal hairs on end.

Ammonia and blood. He had run out of time already.

As he turned to leave, he dropped the generator. Perhaps he was close enough already. The Doctor might be able to rig up something to activate the device remotely.

Never mind that now, his mind screamed. Run!

Chris ran, and the crystal obligingly opened before him.

Something clicked in one ear and he fancied he could hear the echo of some distant creature's chirping.

Chris screwed his eyes shut and doubled his speed.

38

Benny knew that she couldn't wait much longer. Her readout told her that Chris — or rather, his generator — hadn't moved at all for the past fifteen minutes. Either he had dropped the device or . . . she hated to even consider the alternative.

There was still no sign of the Doctor, which worried her even more.

She heard laughter: the manic, high-pitched chortle of the Quiz. This time, she recognized it as her own voice, heightened by insanity and amplified back at her. 'If this is what compiling a book of bad twentieth-century jokes does for the psyche,' she muttered, 'I'm getting' out of publishing at the first opportunity.'

There was nothing more she could do here. She popped the generator back into her pocket and straddled the skimmer. 'It looks like we've lost this game.' Then, with all the mental force she could muster, Benny punched a straight passage through the cavern wall and started the engine. She would get as far as she could before the drug wore off completely.

Already, the buildings of Metro City were beginning to reappear.

Chris no longer knew what he was doing.

He didn't know how he had entered the Undertown, why its dark walkways were full of insectoid alien predators, or even why he didn't just turn around and leave. What he did know was that he was alone,

and that he was in deadly serious trouble.

The power pack in his blaster was exhausted so that all he could do now was run and keep an eye out over his shoulder for the sudden death which seemed unavoidable. His eyes streamed in the continual onslaught of pungent ammonia and he wished with all his heart that Roz was here. Or the Doctor.

Then, suddenly, a creature was upon him, striking out from the invisibility of shadow, and Chris was down, the insect's legs pinning him, choking on his own blood, feeling the skin of his throat tearing. He threw his assailant off with one last push of his straining muscles and he got to his feet, barely able to see as the word merged into a kaleidoscope of colours.

He found his way towards a side passage, feeling for the 39

walls, expecting a second attack at any time. Then he walked into a wall and realized he had groped his way right down a dead end. He turned, but there was no chance of retracing his steps. The insect was blocking the tunnel entrance. Chris shrank back against the hard, cold, immovable brick.

As the monster closed in, he prepared to fight. Hand-to-hand, if need be. He lashed out, but his fist was taken and held. Chris saw the blurred shapes of four more creatures, clustered behind the first. There was no way out.

The insect deliberately drew back its foreleg for the killing thrust. Its colleagues chattered with what sounded like excitement. Chris closed his eyes and fought back the powerful urge to scream. He would face his death with dignity, at least.

The insect's poisonous claws stabbed through him and became embedded in the brickwork beyond.

Chris Cwej was still waiting for that final blow when his molecules were reassembled, some two hundred and fifty thousand miles away.

40

5

Mesozoic Mash

In the same moment that Jason operated the Lizard-Monster

Eradication Device, the lights in Politik Darnak's office blinked out. In the ensuing darkness and silence, he emitted an involuntary whine and shrank back, afraid that this was all some plan on the aliens' part to kidnap or murder him.

Then the lighting was restored, albeit to the dim level of emergency reserves, and Darnak saw that his visitors had not moved at all. He dropped with relief into his padded chair and mopped his brow, embarrassed at his panic.

'What happened?' asked Jason of his colleague. 'Did we cause a power drain or something?'

'There's no way we could have done. The machine is entirely self-energizing.' The man caught Darnak's wide-eyed expression and added, deliberately it seemed: 'By springs.'

'It's the lizards,' said Darnak, a cold feeling crawling over his skin. 'They've sabotaged the Citadel's power supplies, they must have done. They're attacking!'

Jason looked at him with the air of someone addressing a particularly stupid child. 'If it was lizards,' he said reasonably,

'then you've nothing to worry about. We destroyed them, remember?'

Darnak stared at him, dumbfounded. Jason smiled back. The Politik finally tore his gaze away, bustled over to the communications board and called up the Captain of the Guard, demanding to know what had caused the outage. He was in need of a swift dose of reality, bad news or not.

The Captain's reflective helmet hid his features from Darnak's scrutiny; his voice betrayed his worry none the less.

'We've got intruders in the power grid, sir. I don't know how, 41

but they managed to get past security. They've shorted out all primary systems.'

Darnak gripped the console. It felt wet beneath the dark, shivering skin of his hands. 'Lizards?'

'Actually, no sir. It's humans. Looks like Mortannis's lot.

They're demonstrating out front too, equal rights for reptiles and all

that. I sent a contingent to break it up.'

'And you didn't inform me?'

'You told me not to disturb you.'

'You fool! We're being set up for a lizard attack, can't you see? It was rumoured for tomorrow — they've brought the damn thing forward!' He cut the connection with a sharp punch, then sat back and shook as he realized he had no idea what to do.

The Superior, he thought. She'll have to get out of bed for this! But what if he had guessed wrong? What if he looked stupid for disturbing her?

He turned, his eyes involuntarily meeting Jason's. The young man shook his head in faint disbelief. 'We told you, Darnak: the lizards are all dead. We disintegrated them.'

Darnak boiled over, clawing at his own cheeks in impotent frustration. 'You're telling me it's that easy? I don't believe . . .

I can't . . . will you stop playing these games!' He tailed off into a series of incoherent splutterings, and barely registered the ominous darkening of Jason's features.

The next second, he was bolt upright, eyes staring like a frightened rabbit's and brain racing, trying to work out what new threat was assailing him. He could feel the whole office shaking, but he couldn't see any obvious cause. Had the lizard people developed some potent new form of attack?

He flung himself at the commu-screen and punched out the Superior's restricted code, no longer thinking of anything more than his own safety. Before the connection could be made, the whole console bucked beneath him and rode across the room, sending Darnak crashing to the floor beneath it. He tried to force his overweight body out from under the machinery, but its bulk pinned him and he could only watch as the wall against 42

which it had previously stood was torn apart.

The visitors seemed frightened too: they dived for cover as a hail of shattered marble rained down on Darnak's meticulously tidied desk. When the barrage of stone at last ended, Darnak cautiously moved his hands from his eyes to assess the situation. He wished he hadn't.

Rearing over him at ceiling height was a gigantic lizard head, narrow yellow eyes burning into his scalp, mouth dripping acid saliva onto his face. The head was attached to a great, trunk-like neck and a long, leathern, four-legged body which had evidently just smashed its way in from the outside of the Citadel, through three internal and two structural walls and straight into the Politik's office.

Faced with this terrifying creature from his own nightmares, Darnak did the only thing he was capable of.

He screamed once, then fainted.

Even as prison cells went, this one was unimaginatively designed. Bare concrete floor, bare concrete walls, one lumpy mattress on steel-tubing bed . . . There was a high, narrow window — barred of course — and if air-flow was anything to go by, it led to the outside world. But the cell's occupant, even standing on the bed, was too short to see out of it.

The Doctor didn't understand this.

He remembered dropping Chris of on the crystal. The young man had waved and grinned and then the construct's surface had opened for him and he'd dropped in, freely floating downwards in gravity's absence. Bernice had been next: she had just gunned her skimmer and gone for it, an expression of determination on her face.

Then what?

He remembered piloting the TARDIS to its third location, his own drop-off point. He had primed his generator (which he still had in his jacket pocket) and waited for Roz to return to the console room for her briefing. After that, everything was blank and no amount of self-probing could make his mind surrender its hidden memories.

He had obviously entered the crystal as planned. It didn't 43

seem too far-fetched to imagine that it might have wrenched this particular image from his thoughts. He had seen enough cells in his time, and this one (as closer inspection proved) was definitely made up of fictional energy.

But one thing didn't make sense. He should have been travelling through his dreamscape. He had given himself, like the others, a powerful post-hypnotic suggestion to that effect.

So why was he stranded here? Why was his own mind confining him to this room, with time running out? Why couldn't he, clear-thinking as he was at the moment, countermand that subconscious imperative?

Why was there a painful egg-shaped bruise on the base of his skull?

This wasn't logical. Unless, of course, he forced himself to disregard his working hypothesis. That didn't make for any sort of pleasant notions.

Okay then, so he wasn't inside the crystal. So that meant this place was of someone else's construction. But still fictional.

And where did that leave him?

Frustrated by an unaccustomed lack of answers, the Doctor drove his fist into the outer wall.

The building blinked out of existence.

Jason was starting to enjoy himself.

The mutant lizard reared up and smashed its head through the ceiling without any noticeable signs of pain. Jason coughed as another masonry shower kicked up dust about him, then gasped as his companion knocked him to one side, away from a particularly large chunk of falling stone. He sprawled onto his back and looked straight up into Detrios's beautiful obsidian sky.

He realized that Darnak was awake and screaming again, still pinned to the floor. But the monster had shifted its attention to the dozen heavy-booted, combat-armoured guards who had appeared in the corridor and were shooting at it. At first, Jason thought their black, lumpy space-guns looked cool — but the white beams they spat were less impressive, deflected with little effect by the creature's hide. Jason watched in fascination as its 44

head swooped downwards and it plucked one attacker up in its mouth. The man screamed as it tossed its head back and flipped him into the air, into a double somersault and a perfect landing straight down its maw.

By now, the other guards were running for cover and only a couple were still firing. The lizard flicked its segmented tail and swept three of them into and through the great fountain in the main square, forty feet away. They didn't get up.

‘We’ve got to do something about the Politik,’ Jason’s companion shouted over the din. He nodded and they rushed to where the trapped man was thrashing about in vain and —

astonishingly, Jason thought — crying desperately. With the advantage of leverage and with the monster temporarily distracted, it didn’t take much to lift the shattered machinery and drag the panicking Darnak out from under it.

‘We have to think up a plan,’ said Jason earnestly, both hands on the Politik’s shoulders to steady him. ‘You’re down to about three guards.’ Darnak howled.

The lizard brought one massive, three-toed foot down, then lifted it to reveal a red stain on the floor.

‘Two now,’ said Jason. There had to be a way out of this.

It’s the lizards’ secret weapon, that’s what it is,’ moaned Darnak. ‘I knew there had to be one. “Eradicator” indeed.

We’re doomed!’

The two guards had leapt for cover. The creature turned its attention to Jason, who stood and faced it squarely. It flicked its tail in anticipation of the feast, and Jason’s jaw dropped as, suddenly, the monster lizard gave an anguished roar of pain.

Its tail had inadvertently passed through the fountain’s waters!

Darnak closed his eyes and hid behind Jason for protection.

The young man rubbed his hands together and turned to the others triumphantly.

‘I know what to do,’ he said.

Darnak caught his breath as Jason scurried with great excitement across the office and barely avoided the lizard’s tail, which swept past his head. ‘It’s vulnerable to water, can’t you 45

see? I need to get to the fire hose!’

‘You need what? But we don’t have one!’ he protested.

There was something, nevertheless, on the far wall: a red, circular, metal holder which the Politik had never seen before, from which

Jason unwound a thin length of black tubing. ‘You do, you know,’ he said, flashing Darnak an odd look. He fumbled with some sort of nozzle on the tube’s end.

The monster had turned its attention towards him now, regarding the tiny figure with malevolent eyes. Darnak couldn’t help thinking that that was the last he would see of the stranger.

He winced, not wanting to know what happened next, but unable to tear his eyes away.

Then, unexpectedly, Jason turned and yelled: ‘Eat dirt, buster!’ and a powerful jet of cold water shot from the hose and struck the surprised lizard full in the face, with immediate and devastating effects. The monster staggered back, screamed out its rage and almost stepped onto Darnak, who squealed and fell over and tried to roll behind his upturned desk. The last wall of the office crumbled and the room completed its collapse about its remaining occupants. But Jason didn’t seem to care as he leapt happily over two corpses and continued to blast away.

Miraculously — and Darnak still couldn’t see why — the lizard toppled. It hit the ground with a horrific slap, its great body crushing the last two cowering guards and, it seemed, almost contriving to bring down the remainder of the devastated building. It lay still, with Jason blasting afresh at any part of it which dared twitch. Then, before Darnak’s disbelieving eyes, the creature melted, a pool of green slime was left behind, and began to evaporate so that soon no trace would remain.

And that, as Darnak slowly realized in the heavy silence which followed, was that.

He climbed, shaking, to his feet and stood in the ruins of what had once been Detrios’s finest building. His lower lip trembled as the full extent of the decimation sunk in: the Citadel was little more than a demolition site now, festooned with corpses and smelling of death. What was more, beneath the black sky and the Miracle’s heatless glow, it was — as Darnak was only 46

now beginning to appreciate — quite freezing.

He wished this hadn’t happened on his shift.

He pulled his tunic tight about him and wondered what he could say to the Superior. She would be here shortly, as presumably the utter

destruction of her proudest achievement might just constitute a purple-grade situation for her. She couldn't possibly blame him, could she? What more could he have done?

He became aware that his younger visitor was by his shoulder; he turned to him and was astonished at the broad grin on Jason's face.

'Cheer up,' he said, clapping Darnak companionably on the back. 'We won!'

The forest was composed of majestic scarlet-barked trees, twenty or more feet in height, sprouting helical brown leaves and red flowers. The Doctor didn't recognize their type, which meant he had probably never visited this planet before. He was at the edge of a large clearing, in the shape of a perfect rectangle. Too perfect, in fact: at its edges, the trees had had their branches neatly shorn, and a few had even had trunks cloven. It was as though someone had cut out the shape here with no regard for flora. Not long ago, though; the grass was flattened yet still moist and green.

A chill wind rippled through the Doctor's rumpled linen suit and silk shirt. He moved into the comparative shelter of the trees and kicked at the undergrowth as he silently weighed up his situation. Was he still in a fictional world? He wasn't sure.

He knelt down in a carpet of leaves and probed the soil, but his investigation was curtailed as he felt that very soil stir beneath him.

Some sort of an earth tremor? No. Something was coming. He dropped down onto his side and pressed an ear to the ground.

The thing was seven tons at least, and thundering inexorably in his direction. And not far away, its approach was only hidden visually by the dense foliage.

Suddenly, the Doctor could hear trees falling about him —

and, looming over the tops of the branches, was a huge, 47

reptilian creature, its skin brown and its great ovoid head split wide to reveal two rows of sharp teeth.

The Doctor felt his throat going dry. Despite the fact that this certainly wasn't Earth, he knew that the creature he faced was of Terran origin.

It was a tyrannosaurus.

And he certainly hadn't dreamed up that!

The TARDIS was in flight, the central column of its console rising and falling steadily. Its pilot was stooped over the control panels and Jason waited patiently to gain his attention.

'I think,' he said, once this had been achieved, 'that that was a very successful mission.' His face clouded. 'Despite that Superior bitch at the end. You can't please everyone though, I suppose.'

The other man glared at him. 'I don't blame her for her adverse reaction. Do you know how many people just died on Detrios?'

'Oh, come on!' protested Jason. 'We acted as fast as we could. You'd think they would be grateful if anything. Who got rid of their lizards for them?'

'That's not what I meant and you know it. Creating that monster was an extremely irresponsible act.'

'I was bored! Those other things didn't come near us, and when Darnak started going on about it being too easy —'

'And that's an excuse to waste lives, is it? I'm talking about real, human lives here, Jason — not just evil, slimy monsters like before. You caused the deaths of real people!'

'But mainly guards! They're supposed to die, aren't they?'

' *Jason!* '

The young man's eyes flashed hot with resentment. 'Well if you don't like it, then perhaps I should unmake you. I could always build a new friend!'

'And what good would that do you? I'm your creation, Jason.

I say what you want me to say — and right now, I'm acting as the voice of your conscience. You can't eliminate that, no matter how much you might want to.'

The momentary rage had passed. He sighed, defeated. 'Okay, 48

Doc. It won't happen again.'

'I hope not. Now we can return to our main objective.'

‘The henchmen?’

‘That’s right. My arch-enemy’s five accomplices. Now them, you can do whatever you like with. I doubt if there’s any more evil band of thugs in the entire cosmos.’

‘And you know where they are?’

‘I was never mistaken about it. The TARDIS showed that two of the villains were inside the crystal above Detrios. For some reason, it couldn’t land within, so it diverted us to the planet itself. We’ll have to wait for them to come out.’

‘Can’t we go after the others while we’re waiting?’

‘My intention precisely. The ship located two more of the five. The final one is still missing, unfortunately.’

‘Where do we go?’

‘Initially, to Avalone. It’s a holiday resort, a good few thousand years into your future. We’ll be there in ten minutes.’

‘I’ll just go and use the toilet then.’ Jason headed towards the interior door (and, unseen by him, a figure slipped away from its far side and hurried down the corridor out of sight).

‘By the way,’ his companion called after him, ‘I’d appreciate it if you didn’t call me “Doc”. You should address me as

“Doctor” and refer *to* me by my full name.’

‘Whatever you say, Doctor.’ Jason left the control room, his earlier disappointment forgotten. He whistled a jaunty tune as he went.

His face an uncanny mirror of the young man’s own cheerful expression, Dr Who returned to his work.

6

A Bush In The Hand

The old man leaned back against the shale and took another swig of his empty bottle. He imagined it contained whisky this time. He looked again at the young woman, surprised to find that she was still

there. Perhaps, he thought fuzzily, she was real.

She was barely a third of his age; early, perhaps mid-twenties.

Her red hair was cut short and she wore a shapeless, powder blue tracksuit. He had not seen her before. Which was odd.

'What . . . are you doing here?' he asked her, quite pleased that he remembered how to talk.

She turned and looked at him, as if she had not been aware of his presence before. Her features held an almost girlish prettiness. But it was scarred, weighed down by concerns belonging to someone much older than she.

'I'm admiring,' she said at last, 'the "scintillating beauty of the Avalonian horizon". If I'm lucky, I might get one last glimpse of "its beautiful sky, which sparkles like a gem-encrusted eiderdown".'

The old man frowned and wondered if she was mad.

'I can only see grey hills,' he said dolefully. 'And grey sky.'

'You're right,' she said, not disguising her bitterness. just wanted to remind myself of that in case I'm tempted to believe an Avalone tour brochure again.' She resumed her contemplation, looking wistfully towards the flat surface of the unkempt landing area below. A minute later, she muttered: 'I won't miss this place!' then turned to leave.

The old man felt a momentary wash of sadness at her departure. 'I don't even know your name,' he called, without having thought about it; reaching towards her.

'It's Melanie,' she said, without looking back. 'Mel Bush.'

She trudged back down the mound and towards the rotten buildings of the Sunshine Wing.

The old man watched her for a while. Then, knocking back a slug of what he imagined to be rum, he dismissed her from his mind.

Mel wandered about the near-deserted camp, for what she thought would be the last time. She wouldn't have left her room at all had she not believed that.

She had spent almost three months locked away, shunning all contact.

She had long since given up hope of turning Avalone into what it claimed to be. The Camp Entertainments staff, Burney and Brison, were more interested in their own entertainment, and none of the few visitors to this so-called resort planet cared anyway. They came here to drink and sleep and forget.

Except Mel. Because no one had warned her.

Oh, but she had been so clever, hadn't she? Fancying herself the great hitch-hiker, wandering the spaceways with no dependence on anybody. She'd left Glitz and made for Earth, and never mind what he had said about her home world's fate in this era. She would find the decimated planet anyway, pull its scattered populace together to rebuild and to reach for the skies again. She had found a cause.

Six months later, she had ended up here. The irresistible (so the brochures said) Avalone, a temporary rest stop before the final leg of her long voyage. Only, for 'temporary stop', read

'stranded in this miserable slate quarry for almost two years'.

She'd tried, but even her infectious enthusiasm had its limits.

She had put her mind, instead, to leaving, but that was a harder task than anticipated. Not many ship-owners came to Avalone: it was, on top of all else, some sort of navigational hazard.

Those that did visit refused to carry her away without an amount of money she didn't possess.

Mel wandered past the hanging door to the filthy kitchens, where once she had worked before realizing that her wage covered only the exorbitant cost of accommodation and food.

No escape by that route. It was then that, having finally experienced enough of Avalonian life, she had made her retreat into solitude, breaking off her short affair with the cook, Peter, in the knowledge that only one man could help her now.

Well . . . two, perhaps. And after two years of loneliness —

and three months devoting every waking moment to contacting one of

those two men — second best was beginning to look quite good.

Two long years on Avalone. One more since leaving the TARDIS.

'Well, I suppose it's time.'

Silly cow, why had she *said* that?

'Time that I left.'

The more she went over it, the less her own actions made sense.

The Doctor had seemed upset at first. He had got over it quickly. 'Excellent, yes. Mel can keep you out of trouble, Glitz.'

So there she was, roaming the galaxy, many millennia into her own future, her partner a self-confessed thief and swindler and no type of home left to return to. What must she have been thinking?

She had contacted him last night: the fourth time she had entered the Galactic Banking Conglomerate's computer system and left a message only he could find. The first one he had actually responded to.

She had been woken by the red light, pulsing through her eyelids, shocking the brain into wakefulness with one electric thought: freedom! Pulling the old computer out from under the bed, rubbing down the dirt-streaked monitor, moving the mouse frantically, pressing to gain purchase on the threadbare carpet.

She had activated on-screen menus, accessed details of the ice-breaking program which her own system had caught in the act and held trapped. She had smiled at the thought of the computer operator's panic as he tried to close down his terminal, to remove incriminating traces.

He was in for a surprise.

Mel had activated the voice sensor. 'Hello Glitz,' she had said, with satisfaction. Then she'd sat back, thought about him retrieving that message, and laughed for the first time in too long. A laugh born of relief, of the knowledge that her imprisonment was over.

That was two nights ago.

Mel sighed now as she pushed open the peeling yellow door to Chalet

A113. After all this time, its interior still smelt musty and unused. She let her eyes adjust to the gloom, then stepped carefully over the equipment which littered the floor: stripped wires, junction boxes, screwdrivers, soldering irons and circuit boards salvaged from obsolete equipment, torn from the gutted corpses of crashed vessels. Avalone was a spaceship's graveyard. That, at least, had one advantage.

She had sent precise enough instructions to Glitz. He should be on his way; in fact, he should at last be close enough for visual contact. Mel fished out her computer again and worked the mouse with practised ease, negotiating her way through a series of gateways and surreptitiously into her target system.

She toggled into telecommunications mode, sent out a call signal and drummed her fingers against the floor impatiently.

She counted the seconds for thirteen minutes before the light on the monitor's top began to wink. Mel punched in the activation code, trying hard to contain a long-denied excitement. A graphical representation of Glitz's roguish, bearded features appeared, its colours washed out, flickering and swaying as though wind-blown. The computerized Glitz was wearing an obviously forced smile, which well matched the forced tone of his electronically relayed greeting.

'Mel! How good to hear from you again.'

'You could have fooled me,' she said caustically. 'You've been ignoring my distress messages for over a month!'

He feigned innocence. 'Messages?'

'I checked my equipment dozens of times, Glitz. I know they got through. I planted them in the Galactic Banking Conglomerate's computer systems, where I knew the Dragon cypher program I designed for you would find them in seconds.

So don't try pretending that you never received anything.'

'Oh . . . those messages.' Glitz waved his hand vaguely. 'All hopelessly scrambled, I'm afraid. I wanted to come and find you, of course, but I just didn't know where to look.'

Mel pursed her lips to prevent a smile from breaking through.

She was too glad to see him to remain angry. ‘You received my message about the opal shipment easily enough, I see. You hacked into that file in seconds and fell, incidentally, straight into my trap.’

‘Ah, well of course, I knew it was you. I wasn’t fooled.’

‘Or perhaps greed was simply a stronger motivator than friendship?’

‘So . . . there isn’t actually an opal shipment, then?’

Mel laughed. ‘Okay, I’ll believe you, Glitz. Somebody has to.’

‘Well, it was nice talking to you —’

‘Don’t you dare cut out on me now! I need your help.’

Mel started as the picture fizzed and vanished. For one heart-stopping second, she thought she’d lost him. Then, thankfully, the image rolled back onto the screen, its pixels slowly updating to show that Glitz was now wearing an almost comically worried look.

Mel sighed. ‘Don’t worry, I don’t want to join up with you again.’

‘Is that a promise?’

‘I just need a lift to the nearest civilized world,’ she continued, ignoring the implied insult. She cast her eyes about the dingy interior of the chalet. ‘I seem to have got myself unfortunately stranded.’

‘What, on Avalone? Whatever possessed you to go near the place?’

‘Never mind that now. Can you come and get me? Please?’

‘But you can’t be serious, Mel. That whole system is a navigational disaster zone. I’ve less chance of getting the Nosferatu 2 through that than of prising a ten-grotzit bit from the Bank President’s purse!’

‘For heaven’s sake, Glitz, I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t 54

desperate, you know that.’

‘Can’t anybody else help you? Space mercenaries land on Avalone all the time.’

Mel spoke through clenched teeth. ‘I don’t have any money!’

‘Then get some. Somebody with your computer skills could

—’

‘Unlike you, Glitz,’ she interrupted, ‘I am not a thief.’

‘But you designed the Dragon program.’

‘Because I didn’t know what use you’d put it to.’ She tried not to think about the handy subroutine she’d written to ensure that her bed and board on Avalone came free. What Glitz was proposing was a step beyond that. Not that she hadn’t been tempted, these past months.

He sighed then, defeated at last. ‘Okay. I’ll risk my life, I’ll come and pick you up. Just don’t ask any more favours.’

Mel smiled sweetly. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it. How soon will you be here?’

‘Two hours. Three, maximum. Less if I happen to run into a stray magnetic field and come down in burning fragments.’

‘I’ll wait for you by the landing site.’ Mel was about to sign of when she noticed the sheepish expression on Glitz’s face.

‘What now?’

‘I think you might want to evacuate your accommodation rather sooner than that.’

Mel narrowed her eyes. ‘What have you done?’

‘Well, since you pulled me into your system, and since you did have an open gateway into the Galactic —’

‘You haven’t!’

‘Ten million grotzits. The sting of the century!’

‘You’ve used me to swindle the Galactic Banking Conglomerate?’

‘Well, not exactly.’ Glitz looked embarrassed. ‘I tripped an alarm, you see. They traced the intrusion back to your terminal.’

Mel leapt to her feet like a startled cat. ‘You really know how to test a friendship, don’t you Glitz?’ She broke the contact and, for a frightening moment, stood shivering in the darkness. Her thoughts tumbled over each other in their madcap desire to 55

reach the front of her brain.

Glitz had managed to implicate her in an attempted computer fraud of unimaginable magnitude. The punishment, if she was caught, would doubtless be a custodial sentence. And the thought of swapping this prison for an even smaller one was, especially after all her efforts, intolerable.

Mel knew that time wasn't on her side. She had to make some sort of decision fast. And, much as she respected galactic law and prided herself on an ability to cooperate with authority of all kinds and at all levels, she knew there was only one rational, logical thing she could do.

She would have to run for it.

Mel hurried about the room that had somehow become her home. She packed up everything that meant anything to her, apart from the bulky hardware that would only impede her flight. As she bundled her clothes into a pillow-case — the property of Avalonian Resorts Inc. — she felt a brief stab of sadness at the thought of how little she had to show for her life.

A life that had once promised to be eventful and fulfilling. She wondered again why she had ever left the Doctor.

This was the sort of situation he might get into.

No, she corrected herself. It wasn't. The Doctor's adventures were on the slightly more glamorous side of this. He would never find himself packing up a few meagre dresses and preparing to run from a seedy resort on a backwater planet; keeping out of the law's clutches long enough to make a rendezvous with a crook and to flee in his purloined ship. This was, by no means, the Doctor's type of adventure. This was madness.

Mel shook herself from her reverie. For all its poverty, Avalone was still part of the Galactic Federation and thus it was only a matter of time before someone — or something came calling. She threw on her pink, half-length leather jacket, stuck the pillow-case beneath her arm, took one last look at a. room which meant more than she cared to admit and pulled open the door. She found herself staring at a security robot.

It was an unsophisticated model, abandoned here long ago, 56

but no doubt given fresh programming now from afar. Its bulky, archaic metal form hovered three inches above ground as it whirred and clicked what was unmistakably an order to halt.

Mel didn't know what type of firepower, if any, this automaton had. That didn't matter; she didn't give herself time to consider the question anyway. Acting purely on instinct, she shook her worldly goods out of their pillow-case and threw them, diving beneath her would-be captor's grasp and sprinting for cover.

The security robot paused only to shake Mel's underwear from its sensors. Then it turned and glided after her at a more sedate pace.

Mel skidded across the loose stone, twisting, turning, dodging behind the derelict theatre and through the Happiness Wing, around the old anti-gray play-skimmer pool and past the tramps outside the Fun Pub. The robot clung to her tenaciously throughout. She had to end this. She might be faster but the machine was tireless and, although she had kept up her exercises, Mel could feel her body growing weary.

She left the camp behind her, heading out for the hills. She would find it harder to lose the thing here, but there was also less chance of it being able to call on reinforcements. She shot past the old man she had spoken to earlier and he reached out a hand to her, but there was no time to socialize. She leapt over the top of the rise and her heart plunged as she saw that the landing area was empty. As if it wouldn't be! She had known that Glitz couldn't have possibly arrived yet, but she had blindly hoped all the same.

She cast around for a hiding place, knowing the search would be fruitless. Then she spotted something that caused her to do a classic double-take and made her heart swell with hope like it hadn't done for a long time.

A battered blue police box nestled at the hill's foot. There was only one thing it could be. When a familiar figure emerged from the object, Mel's suspicions were confirmed.

He was still exactly as she had last seen him, that ridiculous question-mark pullover and all. He beckoned urgently, but even as Mel rushed towards him, she heard a high-pitched drone 57

behind her and realized that the robot had caught up.

She glanced over her shoulder: her pursuer seemed to be gaining speed on the downward slope. She pushed herself further, faster,

expecting hot blaster fire to bring her down screaming at any moment. She reached him miraculously unscathed.

She was all for diving straight into the impervious TARDIS, but he steadied her with one hand. His face was grim as he turned to the approaching automaton and held up a long, thin, silver device which emitted a low hum. Mel flinched as the robot exploded with a loud bang and an outpouring of black smoke. She turned to him, panting, her face alight.

'You've saved my life,' she whispered. 'I really mean that, Doctor, you have saved my life!'

He didn't say anything. He merely ushered her into the TARDIS. Mel felt that all her dreams had come true at once.

She still paused on the threshold. 'I suppose I should contact Glitz, tell him there's no need to bother coming.' Then she considered the trouble he had caused her and the unanswered pleas of the past few months, and she smiled tightly. 'No. Let him find out for himself.'

* * *

The old man stared over the hilltop and his eyes widened as, with an asthmatic wheeze, the unfamiliar blue box faded slowly into nothingness. He shivered and hurled the empty bottle away from him; it bounced three times on its way down the slope, then came to rest with a soft clink against the remains of the destroyed robot.

Presently, three more of the automatons arrived. They clustered about their comrade, swayed to and fro and clicked with what the old man thought sounded very much like agitation.

As one, they turned to him then, and waited expectantly for the information they knew only he could give.

The old man shrugged helplessly and pointed up into the grey sky.

'She went thataway,' he said.

7

Dungeons and Dinosaurs

The Doctor ran; not because he expected it to help, but rather in the

absence of a better plan. Had it wished to, the tyrannosaurus could have outstripped him easily. But luck was with him and the great creature didn't seem interested in making him its dinner.

Which was odd, he thought, although he wasn't prepared to argue about it.

He burst out of the trees and froze at the sight of another beast. A brontosaurus, grazing placidly for now on grass. Now you,' he muttered, 'don't even exist. You're no more than a mistake made by Earth palaeontologists.'

The dinosaur didn't hear him, or didn't care. It craned its long neck upwards and plucked a red flower from one of the tall trees. The Doctor eyed it warily as he edged stealthily around the clearing.

The brontosaurus was reputed to be a herbivore. But, under the circumstances, he felt justified in wondering if it knew that.

The bedroom was obviously unused, furnished only with a large, gilt-framed bed and an empty white cabinet beside it. The walls gave its location away, their familiar roundelled design identifying the Doctor's TARDIS as surely as a fingerprint.

The prisoner was stirring and beginning to pull against the thick ropes which encircled her wrists and bound her to the bedstead. Jason ran a hand through his untidy, bleached blond hair, then looked down at her and smiled.

'Enjoy your sleep?' he asked, because he thought that was clever.

She spoke venomously. 'Who are you? What have you done 59

to the Doctor?'

'Why, captured him of course. He's in Galactic Prison, where you'll soon be joining him.'

'What are you babbling about?'

Jason put on a pitying expression. 'You didn't think you could get away with it, did you? We'll get your other four partners-in-crime too, soon. That'll serve you right!' He stuck out his tongue, thinking that was clever too. The door slid open behind him and Dr Who sidled into the room.

Melanie almost exploded with relief. ‘Doctor! At last! Will you tell this overgrown schoolboy who I am?’

The newcomer spoke tersely. ‘I’m afraid, Miss Bush, you’ve mistaken me for my own evil doppelgänger.’

‘Your what?’

‘You know him. The result of a tragic experiment gone wrong, my own dark side magnified and given form. He calls himself simply “The Doctor”. And my companion, Jason, and I have dedicated ourselves to ridding the universe of his malign influence.’

‘Which means you,’ Jason put in. She gaped at him.

‘You will be taken to Galactic Prison and questioned.’

‘What are you talking about? What am I supposed to have done?’

Dr Who’s face blackened and his voice was a threatening growl. ‘You dare ask that? You wiped out the Seven Planets in the Althosian System, left Silurian Earth to a lingering death and, even now, have friends plotting to destroy a civilized world!’

‘Wait a minute, I’ve never even been to this Althosian System or whatever. And I certainly don’t know what Silurian Earth is.’

Jason looked expectantly from one to the other; both faces were resolute and angry. But Dr Who gave in first, his manner changing rapidly. When he spoke again, he seemed quite cheerful. ‘Oh yes, I remember. You’re the first, aren’t you?

Those big crimes were after your time.’

Jason joined in. ‘But I’m sure you’ve been just as naughty as the others, all the same.’

‘Maybe you’ll receive a shorter sentence,’ Dr Who said kindly.

The abandoned portions of the city had always held an attraction for Kat. Designed in the good old days, when the sun still shone and no one really thought about the practicalities of maintaining an underground civilization, these areas had been evacuated in the Ruling Family’s first attempts to save power by keeping the population close. They remained dark but for their own faint luminescence and

for the candles and electrical appliances which people brought to them. And, to a barely post-adolescent girl, they carried an aura of excitement and of delicious subversion.

Today, it was different. Today, the disused assembly hall which was Mortannis's home base this month was playing host to agony and death; to the weeping and shattered remnants of what had once been a proud race.

The surviving lizards were lying on rotten wooden benches shored up by stones, or on the cold floor, shivering beneath thin banners proclaiming rebellious messages which seemed pointless now. There were few more than a dozen left, many bleeding from their ears and noses, finding scant relief in the meagre medical rations which had been collected thus far.

Mort's people, recalled from their demonstration, stood subdued, still trying to take in the reality of this casual slaughter. There was little they, or anyone, could do. Even Kat was reduced to gripping Thruskarr's hand and praying for his recovery. His eyes were bandaged, but he seemed aware of her presence and she believed he was comforted by it.

'I thought you were dead,' she kept mumbling gratefully. He squeezed her hand tighter and it seemed he was trying to talk.

But his voice was a painful, rasping wheeze and she touched his shoulder gently, a sign that it was okay to just rest.

Kat wiped her eyes and became aware that Mort had approached. He was by her shoulder, looking at Thruskarr sadly. 'He's one of the lucky ones, if that's any consolation.'

She smiled, knowing now that he had been aware of their friendship; knowing also that it didn't change a thing.

61

'What's happening?'

'Bobstan and Haw'ten are trying to get into a lizard hospital and bring medical equipment back. The patrol groups have been calling in and they've found casualties, but . . . well, not many.

It looks like, whatever happened, it happened everywhere.' He looked about the room. 'What you see here is probably the majority of the

reptilian race.'

Kat felt as if she couldn't react to that. Not yet. She might cry later, when grief rushed in to fill the gap in her stomach.

Whenever she closed her eyes now, she saw fire and blood.

'We could have more trouble too,' said Mort, the catalogue of horrors continuing to unfold relentlessly. 'Enros's followers are moving. They've got wind of all this and are claiming that Divine Retribution has been visited on the lizards by the Miracle.'

'That's stupid!'

'Whatever. They're canvassing and they seem to be gaining converts. I think they've even got some of our lot. We've had a few missing in the last hour.'

'What happened, Mort? Why has it all gone wrong?'

Mortannis shook his head miserably. Kat turned her attention back to Thruskarr, his survival the only light of this bleak day.

He had settled into a fitful doze.

'I found him out there, you know. He was on his knees like the others, howling and shrieking. I . . . I prayed to the Miracle to save him. I know I shouldn't, but I keep feeling the need recently.'

Mort slipped an arm around her. He knew.

'Funny thing is, I felt like my prayers had been answered.

Most of the others died, but he didn't. It's as though Thruskarr survived because I personally wished for it.'

She faced her brother and stared intently into his liquid brown eyes. 'But that's impossible, isn't it?'

Roslyn Forrester snapped into alert mode and crouched beside a rack of Edwardian dinner jackets. Backed up against a clunky spacesuit, she strained to see past a collection of fur-hooded anoraks. Characteristically, the contents of this, one of the 62

TARDIS's many wardrobes (wardrobe? More like a department store!), were arranged in no logical order. She had hoped the chaotic layout of its many shelves might help her remain unobserved here. But her ears

were telling her that someone was in the room now, stalking her. She held her gun ready and tried to hold her breath too. If she was to be detected, she would make somebody regret their discovery.

The intruder stepped into view and Roz tried not to laugh.

'What have they done to you?' she said, affectionately. She leaned over and took Wolsey gently by the neck. She unbuttoned his cape and removed the mask. The cat shook his head, glad to be free of the impositions. He darted off to her right, enthralled by the dangling belt of a blue, woolly dressing gown which hung against one wall.

She slumped onto the floor and allowed her heart to resume its natural pace, the cat's antics a pleasant enough diversion.

She had spent several hours now as a fugitive in her own home and she was tired of that situation. The problem was, she couldn't think of much to do about it.

This hadn't promised to be such an eventful day. Not for her, at least. She remembered arguing for the dangerous job and losing it to Chris on the toss of a coin. One good sulk later, she'd returned to the console room to see the Doctor off and execute her depressingly simple duties. He had been at the controls, his back to her. She had been about to walk in when she had realized he was also unconscious, sprawled on the floor.

It didn't take long to work out which Doctor was which: the fallen one wore the crumpled, cream linen suit which Roz had rarely seen him out of. The Doctor who was still standing wore checked trousers and a pullover too stupid and ostentatious for even him. But as she had made to tackle him, he had vanished, to reappear on the far side of the room and continue his work as if he hadn't seen her. The TARDIS had landed shortly thereafter and he had stepped outside without so much as a word of acknowledgement of Roz's presence. She had heard his voice, recognizably the Doctor's own, floating in through the open doors. 'And where might the TARDIS have brought me 63

this time?'

That was when she had remembered that discretion was the better part of valour. She had secretly watched from the far side of the inner doors as the doppelgänger had re-entered, a young man alongside him: twenty-five, she estimated, dressed in ripped jeans and a plain black T-shirt.

‘I’m looking forward to this,’ the ersatz Doctor had said.

haven’t had a travelling companion since John and Gillian left for the Zebadee University.’

‘I should make the effort to look the part then.’

Roz had watched, agog, as the air molecules around the young man had seemed to ripple and whirl into a miniature hurricane effect. The next instant, he was dressed in a grey shirt, black flannel blazer and short grey pants.

Whatever was going on, she had thought, a full frontal attack was not likely to accomplish much. Not when the hijackers possessed such powers. She had bided her time as the real Doctor was dragged out of the ship (although she had rushed to the console and checked the coordinates they had left him at) and during that episode on Arcalis, which she had watched on the scanner screen but still didn’t understand.

She had locked the doors, but that didn’t keep them out. She had tried stealing the TARDIS whilst they were on Detrios, but its controls were far more complicated than she’d known. So when she had heard they were going after the Doctor’s

‘accomplices’, Roz had crossed her fingers and prayed that Benny or Cwej might join her. Fat chance.

She didn’t know the girl they had collected from Avalone, but judging by the way she had walked straight into the pair’s ambush, it didn’t seem worth making the effort. Besides, she had not been left unattended for more than a minute yet.

So, Forrester asked herself, as Wolsey grew bored of his sport and scampered away, what do I do now?

It’s a good job I hadn’t yet moved into the Citadel,’ the Superior said, the opinion sounding like immutable fact when expressed by her smooth, icy voice. ‘The finest monument to the Detrian people and you let it be destroyed!’

64

Darnak hurried to keep three paces behind as she strode with long, assured steps through the underground city. By her side, Merrioc kept pace as if her equal. In fact, he was only of Darnak’s rank, but the

Superior had always favoured the taller, slimmer, blacker and more self-assured Politik.

'Th-that's not quite what happened, Superior,' he babbled, desperate to curry favour, 'it was an unexpected attack —'

She stopped and turned to face him. Darnak skidded to a halt, swallowed and dropped his eyes away from her smooth bald head and hard, angular but strangely attractive features. 'Ahh.

Your giant lizard monster, of course. Of which there is no sign.'

Darnak's throat felt dry, but the fear that she might send him to the noose loosened his tongue. 'But I — I got rid of the lizards.'

The Superior seemed amused, although it was hard to tell. 'A natural phenomenon, more likely. I have investigators looking into it.'

Darnak fell silent and trembled in her shadow. Like all the Ruling Family, she was pure-bred and so black that she practically glistened in the dim light. Reputedly, even her eyes were like obsidian pools — though few had dared look into them to check. She dressed deliberately to accentuate the effect: her flowing black gown was made of a material which sometimes absorbed light, other times reflected it in criss-cross patterns of silver. She was black like mystery and like lethal temptation, and Darnak was terrified of her.

'All right,' she said finally. 'I know you believe what you say

— you wouldn't dare lie to me. But the fact remains that you mishandled last night's problem totally. At the least, you should have alerted me to the situation.'

Darnak opened his mouth to protest, but it didn't seem worth it. The Superior swept away, Merrioc by her side, and he hurried after them.

'Fortunately,' the Superior continued, 'I have Merrioc here to rely on. Whilst you were bumbling about and setting our rebuilding schedule back by months, he handled our other little difficulty admirably.' Merrioc shouldn't even have been on 65

duty last night, Darnak thought resentfully. He wanted to punch the creep's face in!

Merrioc turned and addressed him in the smug, haughty tones which Darnak loathed. 'We had intruders in the Miracle itself.

However, I was able to get a fix on one and transmat him here.'

They rounded a corner and approached the detention area.

Two guards moved aside to allow them access, and they passed through the security door and by the political malcontents who had been left to fester in two rows of iron-barred dungeons.

In the final cell was an alien: a man with the same unhealthy complexion that Dr Who and Jason had possessed. He was tall, handsome and of an athletic build, but he had obviously been in a fight and his grey coveralls were wet and blood-stained. He lay on the single bunk, breathing shallowly, evidently sleeping.

'Disgusting, clear-skinned animal!' the Superior commented with distaste. She turned to Merrioc. 'Does this thing have a name?'

'I believe it calls itself "Quedge", ma'am.'

The Superior nodded. 'I require efficiency in this matter Merrioc, so I will leave it with you. Take him to the Security Chief and find out what his friend is up to in our Miracle.

Whilst you're at it, arrange an immediate round-up of all rebels.

They obviously participated in whatever happened last night.'

Merrioc nodded courteously and headed off to obtain the cell keys.

Darnak coughed nervously. 'What should I do, Superior?'

'Just get out of my sight!' she said.

At last, when he could hear no more noises, the Doctor came to a breathless halt and mopped his brow. He started as the ground shook and a cascade of leaves fell. But then nothing further happened and he sank down against the trunk of an old tree, exhausted.

He had to think about this, to work out what was happening.

He knew now that the forest, the whole world he was on, was real. But the dinosaurs, somehow, weren't. What had happened to him after dropping Benny and Chris off?

The distant roar of one of the creatures was carried to him on 66

the wind and he knew that he didn't have long. All too suddenly, it was on him and he ran again. Another tyrannosaurus — and this one had spotted him and was hungry.

Luckily, the huge trees impeded its progress. But in the clash between animal and vegetable matter, animal won, and those trees came crashing down violently around the Doctor's ears. It occurred to him as he fled that the dinosaurs couldn't have been here long, else it would have been impossible for the dense forest to grow. There was no time, he told himself sternly, for such conjecture.

He circled and headed back to the clearing in which he had first arrived, although he had no plan beyond a desperate hope of outlasting his pursuer. Then, like a glittering lifeline, he felt a familiar part of his brain buzzing. Salvation was at hand.

His hearts pumping, his legs aching and the monster breathing hot drizzle down his neck, the Doctor hurled himself into a precisely chosen spot. He reached out through his telepathic link and implored the approaching TARDIS to hurry.

Scenting that, at last, its hunt was over, the tyrannosaurus leapt through the last of the constricting trees . . .

. . . and collided hard with the outer wall of the returning Galactic Prison.

67

8

Don't Ask

Bernice sat up and rubbed the back of her neck with a groan.

'You know, before I met the Doctor, I could count the number of times I'd been knocked unconscious on the fingers of . . .

well, one finger. Now it's becoming a regular habit.'

'Occupational hazard,' the computer chirped from nearby.

Benny clambered up and yelped as the jetstream of a passing airbus nearly blew her off the rooftop. She took hold of the sky-bike's

handlebars and mounted it stiffly. ‘Remind me what happened.’

‘You crashed when a raspberry blancmange thrown by the Quiz hit your face.’

‘I should be surprised. My life’s become quite surreal lately.

A fortnight ago, I was fighting mad teddy bears.’ That stray recollection cleared Benny’s mind a little. She spotted a gap in the traffic and went for it. As the bike eased itself into the flow, she rubbed her eyes and wished that the dull ache in her forehead would go away. ‘What am I doing in this place?’

‘You’re chasing the Quiz, by following the clue he left on my street guide whilst you were asleep.’

Bernice looked down at the green felt-tipped words, scrawled untidily across the map screen.

WHY DID THE ELEPHANT USE THE TELEPHONE?

—? Q.

The Doctor strode along the corridors of the Galactic Prison building, hands clasped behind his back, inspecting the decor with a nonchalant air. ‘Grey walls, grey floor, grey ceiling,’ he mused. ‘Not very imaginative.’

He smiled as he rounded a corner and saw the familiar police 68

box shell of his TARDIS. As he approached it, two men appeared from nowhere, one each side of him. They were tall and muscular, dressed in fawn prison officer’s uniforms.

Without speaking or even looking at him, they gripped an arm each and propelled the Doctor’s slighter form towards the TARDIS doors, his feet barely touching ground. He didn’t resist.

After a short wait, the doors swung open and three figures emerged, the first with her hands tied behind her back, being pushed along by the others. The Doctor’s face lit up when he saw them. ‘Of course, I should have realized.’ He doffed his hat towards the prisoner, no mean feat with his upper arms pinned.

‘Hello, Mel. Nice to see you again.’

‘Doctor!’ Mel’s face broke into a grin of relief. But the Doctor wasn’t

looking at her. He was staring intently at the young man in the black blazer.

'I wish I could say the same thing for you,' he growled. The third man — his own double, it seemed — broke the contact, interposing himself between the pair. 'What are you doing out of your cell?' he snapped.

'Inspection tour,' the Doctor answered, his tone belying the levity in his words.

The newcomer snorted derisively. Then he turned away.

'Jason and I have no time to waste on defeated miscreants.' He raised his voice to command the silent guards. 'Take these prisoners and lock them up. Securely, this time.'

The two men saluted smartly and the Doctor was lifted again.

Another guard appeared and took hold of Melanie's shoulder.

'It might interest you to know,' the ersatz Doctor called as they were dragged away, 'that I've tracked down your other accomplices. They'll soon be serving well-deserved sentences with you.' He chuckled to himself and swept back into the TARDIS. The Doctor craned to see over his shoulder: the young man Jason was still outside the ship and glaring at him with steel in his eyes.

'Aren't you going to do something?' Mel wailed.

'No, Mel,' the Doctor said mildly. 'Our friend there is right.

We've been very naughty and we must be punished. It's only fair.'

Roz rose from behind the console, worried. She circled it, but Dr Who was nowhere in sight. Not in here and certainly not on the scanner. But she had seen him pivot and walk in through the TARDIS doors, so quickly that she hadn't had time to escape.

He should have caught her red-handed. So where was he?

She turned her attention back to the screen, and watched as the Doctor and Mel were taken away. She resisted the impulse to charge out and help them. She had some inkling of the powers at Dr Who's disposal and she didn't want to tip her hand yet. Besides, she would have a better chance soon. She knew where the Doctor was now, and

she had heard enough to understand that his captors were going after Benny and Chris next (and one more target — who could that be?). Once those two were aboard, the intruders wouldn't know what hit them!

Jason was heading back, so she turned off the scanner and darted out of the room. From the corridor, she could hear the young man talking — and the voice of his formerly missing companion joined in. 'The more recent accomplices next, I think. They should be out of that mysterious crystal by now.'

There was silence for a few seconds, apart from the clicks of the controls. 'That's odd. One of them has travelled to Detrios.'

'I don't want to go there again,' Jason complained.

'Okay, we'll pick up the other one first,' said Dr Who.

'Has the ship not detected the fifth villain yet?'

'I'm afraid not.'

Roz had heard all she needed to hear. She made her way back to the wardrobe hiding place, and wondered why the TARDIS

hadn't told its new masters about her.

The sky-bike ploughed through the advertising board and Bernice struggled to keep control as plastic filaments exploded in an electrical shower around her. She wrenched the steering about and lowered the vehicle onto a rooftop.

Wheeee-hoooo! the computer yelled in its perennially cheerful voice. 'You worked out that one with microseconds to 70

spare. That could have been much nastier than it was.

'Chalk it down to *déjà vu*,' said Benny, brushing shreds off her coveralls. 'I feel like I've done all this before. Any damage?'

'Only to your pride.'

'Very funny. Where were we going, before the Quiz's video stunt?'

'We were following the main trunk-line out of Metro City.'

'Say that again.'

‘We were —’

‘No, just the last bit. “Out of Metro City!” ’ She sighed wistfully.

‘Heads up,’ the computer interrupted. ‘We’ve got company.’

Bernice looked up, and an impossibly proportioned male figure dropped out of the sky to land beside her. ‘A damsel in distress,’ he said with relish. ‘This looks like a job for me.

She stared at him, faint recollections stirring. He wore a full mask and a white latex costume which accentuated his bodily form to an embarrassing degree. On his right breast, a yellow sword was monogrammed. ‘You’re the White Knight, aren’t you?’

‘Ah. You’ve heard of my heroic exploits.’

‘No, I met you. Well, I met Norman Power.’

The costumed figure was aghast. ‘You know my secret identity?’ She shrugged and opened her mouth to respond, but he pointed an accusing finger at her. ‘You’re an accomplice of Doctor Nemesis!’

‘I am not! I —’

The White Knight slammed into her; she struggled to retain balance but toppled over something behind her. As she hit the roof, the white-clad character leapt atop her and she was dimly aware of the fleeting form of a young girl in a black cape, who had been crouching at her heels. She came to rest with an infuriating little giggle.

‘It’s all right, Sparky, I’ve got her.’ A gloved fist slammed into Bernice’s face. She howled in fury and brought her knee up hard.

The White Knight fell back with a gasp and doubled over.

‘Serves you right for emphasizing your biggest vulnerability,’

said Benny pointedly. Then she heard giggling and realized that the sidekick was behind her again. She spun round, but her legs had become tangled in cord. The caped girl pulled on the end of the line and Benny felt herself falling right over the roof’s parapet.

For a second, she pedalled thin air ridiculously. Then the distant street rushed towards her and she felt nauseous as dirty air gusted into her

face. Absurdly, she hoped she hit ground before one of the air vehicles clipped her and broke her neck. At one point, the young driver of a streamlined car sounded his horn and screamed at her to get out of his way.

She had plummeted as far as the third storey when a shape blurred past and she dropped into the strong arms of the White Knight. Her stomach gave a disgruntled leap as her direction reversed instantaneously. ‘You don’t get away from me that easily,’ he stated.

‘Oh gee, it’s a fair cop,’ she answered sarcastically. ‘And I almost escaped too in my cunning disguise as a pavement pancake.’

‘I’ve a lot of questions for you,’ the White Knight said as he deposited Benny, still tangled in cord, onto the roof. Sparky was chuckling again and Bernice wanted to punch her.

‘I’m sick of questions. Are you in league with the Quiz or what?’

‘The Quiz?’

‘That’s who I’m looking for.’

The White Knight and Sparky exchanged a look of surprise.

Then, to Benny’s amazement, the Knight stepped forward and snapped the line which bound her. ‘I apologize,’ he said with almost too much sincerity. ‘You wouldn’t believe how often I end up fighting future allies over some misunderstanding.’

‘It must be tiresome,’ Benny said, with no sincerity at all. She rubbed her legs ruefully.

‘But of course, if you’re fighting the Quiz, then we have a foe in common.’

‘So we team up, just like that, eh?’

‘Come, I will take you to him.’

She shook her head. ‘Don’t worry, my computer’s sussed things out.’

‘I think you’ll find it’s wrong,’ the Knight said knowledgeably. ‘I know where the Quiz is.’

‘Watch what you’re saying, buster!’ the computer piped up.

‘You’ll hear from my lawyers.’

‘I remember where I know you from now,’ Benny said thoughtfully. ‘The Land of Fiction. You don’t exist. Which gives me a few clues about this place.’ She smiled as fragments of her pre-Metro life began to fill her mind. ‘The question is,’

she said, now talking more to herself than to him, ‘why are you here? I doubt if I imagined you — I don’t think you loom so large in my memory, and certainly not like this. When I met you, you were . . . well, different.’ She looked the White Knight squarely in his eyes, as if he could provide the answers she wanted. ‘So whose thoughts did you crawl out of this morning?’

‘This place is weird,’ said Jason, casting his eye about Metro City distastefully. ‘It looks like someone’s jammed thirty different time zones together. And the traffic!’

‘Nevertheless,’ said Dr Who, checking the reading on the large plastic heat detector which he’d whipped up from nothing,

‘it is where our next fugitive —’ He vanished in mid-sentence.

Jason stood, at a loss, for a few seconds. Then he frowned and set his jaw, until his friend reappeared, as though nothing had happened.

‘— is hiding. Not too far away now.’

‘Do we have to go further in?’ complained Jason. A low-flying hovercar ruffled his hair and almost sent him flying. He scowled at its rear and, a moment later, it crashed into an airbus and exploded. The noise of anti-gray engines quietened, the result of an unexpected lull in traffic.

Dr Who smiled. ‘According to my detector, she’s coming towards us.’ He looked at Jason. ‘Your doing, I suppose.’

Mel paced her cell impatiently and threw dirty glares at its 73

locked door. She hadn’t broken out of one prison to end up here.

Then she stopped and listened. She was sure she had heard her name called, muted and indistinct, but unmistakably in the Doctor’s own rolling Scottish accent. It came again and she hurried to the wall,

pressing one ear against it. ‘Doctor? Is that you, Doctor?’

‘Ahh, Mel, you’re in there.’

‘I thought you couldn’t hear me. I was shouting for ages.

‘I know. I was busy thinking.’

She frowned but let the comment pass. ‘What’s going on here, Doctor? Who was that — that imposter? And why was he wearing your clothes?’

‘He’s not important. Just be careful of the boy.’

‘Of Jason? Well, I know he was strange, but —’

‘Strange and incredibly powerful, Mel. His mental processes are keeping this building in existence at the moment. So long as the Galactic Prison remains in his active memory, we will both be trapped within it.’

Mel thought about that, but she was interrupted from her cogitation as a shattering roar sounded close to the window.

‘Doctor?’ she called, her voice trembling.

‘Just the local fauna,’ he assured her. ‘Sort of.’

‘But I’ve seen those things. I stood the bed end-up by the window and climbed up to see out. They look like Earth dinosaurs, huge meat-eating ones.’

‘I know, I encountered a couple of their kind an hour ago.’

‘When you escaped?’

‘Something like that.’

Mel frowned again. ‘Why are you being so evasive, Doctor?

It’s not like you at all.’

‘What did you think of them? The dinosaurs, I mean.’

‘They looked . . . well, weird. I don’t know how to describe it.

It was like they’d just been . . . superimposed on the landscape.’

‘Observant as ever, I see,’ the Doctor approved. ‘And memory like an elephant’s, if I recall.’

‘The nearest one was sort of hovering,’ Mel pressed on, 74

remembering, ‘as if it wasn’t really here at all. And I think it had a thin yellow line around it.’

The Doctor laughed. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve faced monsters exactly like that before.’

‘What happens if they . . .? No, never mind.’

‘What?’

‘It’s just that . . . well . . .’ Mel faltered uncertainly and smiled at her own superstitions. ‘Whenever I conjecture about something awful like that happening, it always seems to.’

She could almost see the Doctor’s Cheshire cat grin through the wall. ‘And you’ve noticed that, if those creatures wished, they could bring this whole building down around us in seconds. Well, I think it’s unlikely. Jason conceived of them as an extra layer of security. They’ll have no interest in attacking.’

Mel breathed a sigh of relief. ‘That’s comforting. So those things aren’t real then?’

‘Not as such, no. But they’re certainly solid.’

‘And they’re being maintained in the same way as this place is? By Jason’s thoughts?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But . . . what if Jason forgets the prison?’

The wall shimmered momentarily.

‘And . . . remembers all about the dinosaurs?’

Another great roar sounded from outside.

‘Wouldn’t that cause the whole building to disappear and leave us with no protection whatsoever against them?’

The White Knight swooped low over Metro. Bernice clung tight to his

neck, dug her knees into his ribs and tried to avoid being sick as he performed a barrel roll to circumvent a manoeuvring airbus. ‘I never thought I’d miss that computer,’ she said queasily.

‘He’s below us,’ the Knight reported, oblivious to her discomfort.

The Quiz was standing in the open back of a hovercar, waving over his shoulder whilst guiding the vehicle with one hand.

‘Put me down before you start fighting, won’t you?’

75

The White Knight laughed and stared intensely at the silver-garbed figure. A moment later, the Quiz jumped, startled, and turned his full attention to steering. His hovercar was going down.

‘What did you do?’

‘I used my heat vision to fuse his navi-chip.’

‘You’ll kill him!’

‘So? He’ll be inexplicably resurrected next issue, won’t he?’

‘If you say so.’

The car was out of sight now beneath six levels of congested traffic. A plume of black smoke marked its trail. Benny groaned as her carrier spotted a gap and plunged through it.

The wreck of the Quiz’s vehicle had stalled cars on six lanes of the ground-level thoroughfare. Amazingly, its occupant had escaped unscathed. However, the Knight’s sidekick had appeared from somewhere and joined the action; the pair were grappling now at the roadside.

The White Knight dropped Bernice and leapt into battle without a thought. ‘Thanks for keeping him occupied, chum,’

he addressed Sparky. Then he took hold of the Quiz’s throat, held him immobile and drew back his fist to land it across the villain’s jaw. Sparky giggled excitedly — and unnecessarily, Benny thought.

‘That’s it!’ she said as the Quiz landed in a pile beside her.

‘I’m out of here.’

The White Knight called her back. ‘Hold on, don’t you want to see who’s under his mask?’

‘No need. I remember now. I remember everything.’ Which meant, she thought, that she must be near the surface of the crystal. A few steps more and Metro City, its traffic and its super-powered protector would all be so much fictional dust.

The White Knight unmasked his fallen adversary, and Benny looked despite herself.

He had the Doctor’s face.

‘I’m sorry for staring,’ she said, when she had done so for a moment, ‘but I didn’t know this story had a multiple choice ending.’

‘It doesn’t,’ Dr Who assured her, and someone brought a heavy implement down on the back of her head.

‘Oh, not again,’ Benny muttered as black spots coalesced in her vision. ‘There are two good ways of attaining oblivion. Why do I always get the one which doesn’t involve vodka?’

She fell over.

Jason eyed Bernice’s crumpled form dispassionately. Then he concentrated until Metro City blurred and flattened. Its dirty browns and greys ran like water colours, merging into lush greens and sparkling blues. He sighed, relaxing in the cool, fresh breeze which blew in from the sea. Bird-song drifted across the dew-gilded field.

‘That’s better, isn’t it?’ said Jason with a smile.

Face down on the grass, Benny groaned and stirred. Dr Who produced an enormous cartoon mallet and smashed her back into unconsciousness.

9

Dark Secrets

Chris Cwej surfaced from a dream about fluffy bunnies, to hear an insistent voice droning in his ear, entreating him to wake and to

answer the questions put to him. What questions? he wondered vaguely.

He felt the back of a hand across his face and his neck snapped to the left. His muscles felt heavy and his head lolled as the dream world washed back over him. The rabbits were sneering and jabbering and insects were erupting from their cute little bodies in explosions of black blood.

'. . . not responding to . . .'

'. . . alien metabolism, obviously overly susceptible to the sleeping drug we . . .'

A light faded up from somewhere and imprinted orange globes onto the backs of his eyelids. Chris felt something sharp against his larynx and heard a muttered threat, something about having his throat slit if he didn't cooperate.

At last, he managed to force his eyes open. He closed them again as a fierce blast of light stabbed into his optic nerves.

'I think he's coming round.'

The voice in his ear spoke again, its tone dripping with menace. 'You will tell me why you wish to destroy us.'

The security forces moved in quickly and violently, rapping out warnings once only and shooting those who failed to obey instantly.

Kat did think about resisting, but the first few deaths dissuaded her. The rebels had neither the manpower nor weaponry to make a decent fight of it. She leant over Thruskarr's inert body, no longer uncomfortable against his 78

moist skin, and she cried for a nightmare that seemed never-ending as the cold sound of blaster fire screeched loud in her ears. Of those few who had risked fleeing, most were brought down in broken heaps. The stench of smoke and blood filled Kat's nostrils and dragged tears from her eyes.

Gloved hands latched onto her arms a moment later. She was pulled away from her sleeping friend and, although she didn't struggle, she was punched twice in the stomach for good measure. She was dragged roughly from the hall and pushed into a growing crowd of sullen rebels. They had believed that the Detrian rulers didn't know how to

find them. They hadn't been prepared for this.

A few of her comrades, it seemed, had escaped. But more were lying in the settling dust now, dead and dying. The wounded lizard men, ignored by the guards, were left unattended, to their own fates. Her brother, Mortannis, stood mutely by her side and nursed an injured shoulder, the fight gone out of him for the first time Kat could remember.

'We've got enough,' one of the tormentors grunted, an age later, and the contingent of black-uniformed men surrounded their captives and urged them forward, using their guns like cattle-prods. Kat'lanna stumbled on with the rest of them, head spinning, the iron taste of blood in her mouth and her heart weighed down by the misery of frustrated anger.

Chris was strapped by his arms, legs and torso to a metal chair.

Beyond that, he could discern little. A powerful light shone directly into his eyes and, behind it, he could only just make out the vague shadow of the squat man who kept barking questions.

'I've told you,' he said for the third time. 'I don't even know which planet this is. I've no interest in destroying anything.'

'Unsatisfactory!' his interrogator snapped. 'You will answer the question or you will be taken out of here and hanged. Why do you wish to destroy our planet?'

Chris groaned and his head rolled forward. His eyelids felt heavy. 'By the Undying One,' another voice hissed, 'what sort of Security Chief are you? Can't you get a thing out of him?'

The interrogator spoke archly. 'My usual techniques, Politik 79

Merrioc, can frequently prove fatal. The Superior does not want this specimen harming, I understand. Are you countermanding that order?' The onlooker sighed with exaggerated impatience.

Chris felt a hand on his chin. He opened his eyes, a difficult action made easier by the round face which leered at him and blocked out the uncomfortable light. 'Are you a servant of Darkness, sent to bring down Enros and his Miracle?'

'Am I what?' His head was thumping and black spots were crowding his peripheral vision.

The Security Chief let go of him and turned away, disgusted.

‘As I said at the outset, Politik, the best thing we can do is fill the alien with truth drug.’

‘But that’s expensive.’

‘And this is an important matter.’

The one called Merrioc fell silent as, presumably, he contemplated that. By the time he answered, Chris was asleep again.

Some time later, Merrioc stood at ease in the Superior’s office, returning her gaze evenly. ‘So the alien saboteur refuses to talk?’ she said, resting one elbow on the plastic desktop and lowering her chin onto her fist.

‘Well, not “refuses” exactly, Superior. He seems incapable of understanding. The Security Chief thinks he may be damaged.’

‘Have you considered using a truth drug, Merrioc?’

‘I have already authorized that expediency, Superior. The Security Chief will question the boy again when the dosage has had time to take effect.’

She smiled and settled back into her seat. ‘Well done, Merrioc. I can always rely on you.’

‘There is something else, ma’am.’

‘Oh?’

‘More intruders, I’m afraid. In the Miracle.’

She sat up sharply. ‘What?’

‘We caught one in the transmat beam, but for some reason it never arrived here. It was almost as though the alien disintegrated en route.’

‘Well try again!’ the Superior ordered.

‘Have done, ma’am. Unfortunately, the new arrivals — two or three of them — converged with our earlier intruder.

Whatever was protecting it now covers all of them. We can't lock the system onto their coordinates.'

The Superior rubbed her chin and thought furiously. When she got to her feet a moment later, she was ready to command decisively again. 'I want a dozen people sent to the Miracle's surface.' She waved her subordinate's protest aside. 'I know it's blasphemous, but I can't believe Enros would want us to sit by whilst this planet dies.'

Darnak did lose a lot of guards last night, ma'am.'

'Then send some of the captured rebels instead. They're more expendable anyway. Also, I want the battleship *Morningstar* brought on-line and ready to scramble.'

Merrioc bowed obsequiously. 'I doubt we have the power reserves available for such an operation, Superior. Should I divert it from the lower castes' grid?'

'Oh, absolutely,' she confirmed. 'This is for their own good, after all. I want you to see to that yourself, Merrioc.'

'And the rebels?'

She sighed. 'I suppose even Darnak couldn't make too much of a mess of that simple task.'

Chris woke, to a more pleasant scenario this time. He lay on something soft, his forehead soothed by a wet cloth. But his chest felt tight and he had pins and needles in both hands and feet. For a while, he didn't dare move lest the light was to assault him again. Then gentle fingers fondled his hair and he opened his eyes with caution.

'Oh!' exclaimed the young woman who knelt by his bed. She pulled back, a little scared.

'Hello?' Chris said, squinting to see her although the room was dark. His head ached and his throat was dry.

'Hello,' she returned uncertainly.

Chris sat up, his eyes adjusting. He focused on a barred door, set into a stone wall. A cell. Vague memories of the interrogation seeped into his mind.

'My name's Kat'lanna,' the girl said. She was about eighteen 81

in Earth terms, he judged. Her skin was black, but a deep, rich black not found on his home planet even amongst the pure-bred families like Roz's. She had no hair — not even eyebrows —

which made her head shape seem unusual and, to Chris, strangely fascinating. She wore a purple bodysuit, which accentuated her delightful curves. She regarded him through curious brown eyes which didn't blink.

'I'm Chris Cwej,' he said.

'Kriskw'dge?'

'No. It's two names. Chris — Cwej.'

'Why do you have two names?'

'Just call me . . . well, Christopher will do.' He normally preferred 'Chris'.

'Kat,' she said, smiling.

'Where are we?'

'In prison.'

'I guessed that. Which planet?' Kat stared. 'No one seems to want to tell me,' Chris added lamely.

'Detrios.' She seemed to have decided he was friendly enough. She moved over and sat beside him. Chris rubbed his arms; the numbness seemed to be spreading.

'What is it like being pink?' Kat asked him, perfectly seriously, reaching out to stroke his hair again. 'And this . . .

this yellowish thing on your head. What is it?'

Chris didn't know what to say, but he couldn't help smiling. Kat giggled and pulled away. 'It's nice,' she said. He liked her laugh.

'Are you my cellmate then?'

Kat shrugged. For now. They'll split us up when they can find room. Right now, they're having to double up. The security forces have just rounded up a lot of rebels. Me included.'

Chris frowned. ‘Rebels against what?’

‘The Ruling Family.’

He felt a surge of disappointment. ‘Oh. You’re a criminal.’

Kat’s nostrils flared. ‘Why should we put up with them?

They’re not elected! They just arrange things so that they keep all the money and power whilst we get poorer.’

‘Well, maybe it seems like that.’

‘“Seems” nothing!’ Kat snorted. ‘Our planet is in ruins and the Ruling Family are too busy with their squabbling to do anything.’ She fixed Chris with a glare, defying him to argue.

‘This morning, they wiped out ninety per cent of an intelligent race, just because they looked different.’

Chris recoiled. ‘You’re joking!’

‘You don’t really think so,’ Kat said. She looked away, then turned back a moment later, as though a new thought had occurred to her. ‘But you could help us, couldn’t you? You’re an alien. Don’t you have any powers? An armada of spaceships or something?’

‘Hardly,’ Chris said. His voice came out hoarse. He coughed and put a hand to his burning throat. ‘I’m not even sure I can stay awake. It feels like something hot is burrowing its way round my body.’

‘That’ll be a truth drug.’

‘Great! So that’s why they gave up on the interrogation. Not because they believed me or anything; they’re just waiting for this thing to take effect.’

‘Security are big on chemicals at the moment. Don’t worry, they haven’t found any side-effects to this one yet.’

Chris blinked and tried to shake the fuzzy feeling in his head.

His mind latched onto something that Kat’lanna had said earlier. ‘Why is your planet in ruins?’

‘We lost our sun. But our ancestors predicted it. They moved underground and constructed grids which gave us centuries of power. We were supposed to use that time to find a permanent solution. The Ruling Family wasted it. If it wasn’t for the Miracle, we might already be dead.’

‘The Miracle?’

‘It came from nowhere. The astronomers saw strange lights in the sky and sent a ship to investigate. They found that a great big crystal had formed up there.’

‘Crystal?’ Chris echoed. He was beginning to feel sick — and not only because of the truth drug.

‘It provided light and oxygen, and a bit of heat. It was safe to go out onto the surface again. We were able to start rebuilding 83

and to drain solar power from the Miracle to recharge our grids.

It saved our lives.’

‘I can see why you call it “the Miracle”.’ He remembered the Security Chief’s accusations and a cold hand tightened around his stomach. Kat looked at him and he turned away, embarrassed, from those beautiful, intense eyes.

‘Is something wrong, Christopher?’ she asked, concerned.

He shook his head. He wanted to say ‘No’, but he couldn’t.

The drug was working, inhibiting him, preventing such lies from being formed.

‘Do you know something about our Miracle?’ Kat guessed.

‘Is that it?’ Chris felt the words rising horribly to his mouth, his brain compelling him to answer truthfully.

Mercifully, before he could, the fiery numbness shot round to encircle his chest and Chris blacked out a third time.

Mortannis was confused. He had expected nothing more than a show trial and a quick execution. Instead, he and six comrades (six of the most physically intimidating rebels, he noted) had been herded into a glass cubicle in the corner of a room strewn with old bits of machinery and loose wiring. Three technicians worked at battered consoles,

whilst the tubby form of Politik Darnak paced and muttered impatiently.

‘They’re going to get rid of us, aren’t they?’ The speaker was Angh’enna, a giant man who had been crushed by the day’s events. He spoke dolefully, as one expecting only to die.

Mort cursed and banged on the glass wall. ‘What do you want with us?’ he yelled. Darnak turned his back deliberately.

‘This is a transmat booth,’ someone quavered. Mort knew that already. ‘What if they’re going to send us into deep space or something, get rid of us that way?’

Mort shivered at the thought. The others mumbled uncomfortably. ‘They won’t,’ he said, trying to sound confident. ‘They’d never waste that much power. Not when a rope is cheaper. And they’d prefer to do that in public anyway.’

That calmed the others, but not much. Mortannis could understand their being frightened. He was too.

One of the technicians reported something to Darnak; Mort 84

strained, but the glass prevented him from hearing the words clearly. Then the Politik turned to them and rubbed his hands with a glee which bode no good for any of them. ‘We’re sending you to the Miracle.’

A gasp of astonishment rippled through the assembled captives. ‘Without spacesuits?’ Mort protested, worrying that his comrade’s guess might have been right.

‘I’m informed that the atmosphere is breathable, if perhaps a little oxygen-rich.’ Darnak smiled tightly. ‘I suppose we’ll find out soon enough if I’m wrong.’

‘Why are you doing this? This isn’t just a way of disposing of us!’

‘Of course not. You will be required to fight for your planet.

There are intruders inside the Miracle and we assume that they intend sabotage.’

‘Why should we help you?’

‘Because the destruction of Detrios would not exactly be to your own

advantage.'

The rebels were struck dumb by the logic of that statement.

Mort decided to bluff. 'What difference does it make? You're going to execute us anyway.'

'In the event of your survival, the Superior has promised a pardon in exchange for services. I feel she is being quite generous.'

Darnak didn't allow time for the prisoners to protest again.

He turned to the technicians and ordered: 'Send them.' Mort reached out to bang on the glass wall, to say something.

The cubicle glowed red and reality faded to white.

Darnak smiled as the light went out in the now-empty booth. He would see no more of those rebels: the Superior's so-called assurance had never actually been made, and he knew that power was at too much of a premium to waste bringing such scum back to Detrios, successful or not. They would starve on the Miracle.

'Well done,' he complimented the technicians, almost managing to sound genuine as he wiped his sweaty hands dry on his grey tunic. It made a nice change for the Superior to put him in charge of something and for it to go ahead without any 85

problems. 'Keep monitoring and let me know what happens.'

"Politik?' an uncertain voice followed him as he headed for the doorway. Darnak screamed inwardly.

'We've got a problem,' the technician said.

He wanted to cry.

When Chris came round, there were lights in his eyes again and he felt the leather straps binding him to the interrogation chair.

For a moment, he imagined that the cell might have been a delusion. What if he had been here all the time, unconscious and dreaming?

No, that couldn't be. Kat's image was too clear.

The Security Chief was leaning across him, upper lip curled in distaste. More awake this time, Chris was able to screen some of the

light out and to fix his gaze on his interrogator's stuck-out ears and piggy eyes. 'I trust you are ready to tell us everything?'

'Not really,' he replied with forced honesty. 'I feel a bit sick.'

The Security Chief slapped his face and Chris seethed with the injustice of it. 'You've injected me with truth drug, what point is there in hitting me too?'

'I enjoy it.'

'Well, carry on like that and I'll have to tell you what you want to know anyway.' Chris groaned. That hadn't been quite what he had intended to say. 'Look, before you lose control again, let me make this clear: I've only just found out where I am. I don't know how I came to be here or what I'm accused of.

If I did, I would have answered your questions long ago.'

He looked up at the Security Chief, expecting to be slapped again. He was treated to a slight smile instead. 'We brought you here from the inside of our Miracle. You stand accused of trying to sabotage said Miracle, and thus of attempting to end life on this planet.' He exploded in rage and punched Chris so hard that his neck ached from the whiplash. ' *Now will you talk?!* '

Chris nodded wearily and felt his eyes drooping again. The drug was extracting a confession from him, but it didn't matter.

He wanted to talk anyway.

'You're right,' he told the Security Chief, matter-of-factly. 'I think I've been tricked into trying to commit genocide.'

10

When I Say Run . . .

'Well,' Kat said, leaning back on the bed with a deep breath as she digested what her cellmate had just told her, 'thanks for being honest anyway.'

'I didn't have much choice,' Chris pointed out, with a nervous half-laugh. He rubbed his arms and Kat guessed he was still feeling the effects of the truth drug, even so long after his interrogation. He sat

beside her. ‘Do you hate me?’

‘What, for trying to destroy my planet?’ Alarm sculpted his face briefly. She diffused it with a grin. ‘Of course not. You didn’t know what this “Doctor” was planning, did you?’

‘No,’ he muttered. ‘That’s the problem. He never tells me and I don’t ask.’

Kat reached over and played with his hair. She still found it fascinating. ‘You’re too trusting, that’s your trouble.’

‘Too gullible!’

‘But the Doctor could have his reasons, you know.’

‘How can you say that?’

Kat shrugged. ‘You said you liked him. Maybe what he told you about our Miracle was true; perhaps he just didn’t know how much we depended on it?’

Chris shook his head. ‘He knew. And if he had “reasons”, then he should have told me, shouldn’t he?’

She didn’t answer. Her thoughts had been playing about the idea of the Miracle and, suddenly, some things he had told her were starting to gel. ‘You know,’ she said slowly, ‘it does make sense.’

‘What does?’

‘These “fictional forces” you talked about. The Detrians discovered the Miracle first, right? But what if what they 87

actually found was a cloud of fictional energy, which their thoughts reshaped?’

‘Into what their planet needed most!’ he exclaimed, realizing.

Then something else occurred to Kat and her excitement was stifled. ‘No. Into what *we* needed. We humans. Subconsciously or not, those first astronauts created something that gave us an advantage over the lizard people. Something that gave us all we needed except heat!’

She fell silent, pondering that unpleasant thought. She recalled Thruskarr’s disdain of the Miracle and she hoped he was all right, wherever he was now. To her surprise, she realized that thinking of

him made her feel guilty. For what?

The affection she was beginning to harbour towards Christopher? Thruskarr had said that too; that it was not him she loved, just the idea of being daring, flirting with a lizard. How much better, then, to romance an alien? Was that what she wanted?

She focused on his face again. His distant expression mirrored her own. ‘What are you thinking?’ she asked, as a conversational gambit.

‘I was wondering if we might end up sleeping together,’ he said.

Mel winced as, not far away, another section of forest fell. The Doctor held her tight, his arm around her shoulders, as she fought back the desire to scream. The pair sat nestled in the roots of a scarlet tree on the edge of the clearing where once their prison had stood. By keeping still, they hoped to avoid detection.

‘How long is this likely to go on?’ Mel whispered.

‘Impossible to say. Our friend evidently still likes the idea of having dinosaurs about.’ She shuddered and the Doctor squeezed her reassuringly. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve survived the real thing several times. When you make enemies of Silurians, you have to be prepared for their pets too.’

‘I wish you’d stop advising me not to worry,’ said Mel, ‘at least until that becomes a sensible proposition.’ She tried to give him a faint smile, but her expression became a frown 88

instead. A vague memory had surfaced. ‘Just a minute. You said “Silurians”. Your doppelgänger mentioned them, I’m sure.’

‘Oh?’

‘Silurian Earth, yes that was it. He said you’d “left Silurian Earth to a lingering death”.’

‘That memory of yours.’

‘And “wiped out” seven planets in the — Arthurian? —

Althosian — System.’

The Doctor dismissed the topic with a wave. ‘An entirely false account of what happened, of course.’ Mel opened her mouth to press the point, but he turned away as though straining to remember. ‘In fact, it

was just after Silurian Earth that I met Jason. Both were part of Mortimus's plots, I recall.' He sneaked a look at her, and seemed quite pleased that he had her attention. 'Jason, although I didn't know his name then, had been given control over a unique space—time phenomenon: a place known as the Land of Fiction. Within that Land, he had absolute power. He could manipulate its energies to do whatever he wanted.'

'What did you do?'

'Escaped, initially. Then asked the Time Lords to step in.

They dismantled the Land and returned Jason to his proper place and time.' He nodded slowly and seemed to drift off, as though he was now talking more to himself than to her. 'That was Earth, 1993. Eight years later, fictional forces start flooding into this dimension. The Time Lords didn't account for that possibility, and somehow Jason is able to act as a conduit for those forces. They tend towards him and he uses them, to do exactly what he wishes in reality.'

'Sounds dangerous,' Mel commented. The ground shook as a tyrannosaurus stomped through the trees, mere yards to their right. She shivered and added: 'He scares me, anyway.'

The Doctor seemed to be in a dreamworld. She watched him, looking into those sparkling, kind eyes she had once known well. They seemed inscrutable, their lenses shuttered to hide the thoughts which now dwelt behind them. He'd avoided her question, and she would learn the reason why. Not yet, though.

'What you are thinking?' she asked him gently.

His voice was distant. 'General thoughts. My new companions. I left them in danger.'

'Your friends can usually take care of themselves,' Mel said, trying to sound reassuring.

'So long as they keep hold of the generators,' he muttered, nodding slowly. 'So long as the Detrians can't lock a beam onto them.'

'You're losing me.'

The Doctor jerked out of his reverie, seeming fully aware of Mel's

presence for the first time in several minutes. ‘I think . . .’

he began, then faltered and smiled. A genuine smile, from the good old Doctor. ‘I think I’ve thought of a way out of this.’

He delved into his pockets.

‘What are you saying?’ the Superior snapped, leaping from her chair.

Darnak shuffled uncomfortably. ‘The intruders, ma’am. They

. . . left.’

‘How?’ she demanded, arms spread in an exaggerated gesture of bewilderment.

‘They disappeared. Like they arrived.’

‘And where are the rebels?’

‘Their patterns are in the transmat buffer, Superior.’

‘What?’

He explained hastily. ‘I felt it unwise to use power re-materializing them in case they were needed later. Security have orders that, if the intruders return, they should track their coordinates and complete the transmat.’ He considered this decision quite praiseworthy and looked to the Superior to tell him so.

‘You are an incompetent moron, aren’t you?’ she hissed. ‘If you’d acted faster, we could have captured the saboteurs and we wouldn’t be wasting power now on those rebel animals. You do know that the prisoner confirmed his intentions, don’t you?

That he and his companions are trying to destroy our Miracle and doom us all?’ Darnak swallowed. ‘And you, Darnak, are turning into their biggest ally!’ She sighed disgustedly and sat 90

down. ‘Well, let’s hope they’ve given up. We’ll have Merrioc to thank for his decisive actions if they have.’

Darnak scowled and made to leave, but the Superior stopped him with a glare. ‘I want you to do something, if you’re capable. Enros has requested the presence of two prisoners: the alien and the rebel leader. You can arrange for both to . . . shall we say, fall into his hands, can’t you?’

Darnak coughed nervously and inspected his toes, remembering Mortannis's face as it twisted in alarm and vanished in the cubicle's red glow.

The Superior groaned with overstated impatience. 'What have you done?'

Chris sucked his knuckles and wished he could drop dead where he sat.

Kat'lanna, conversely, burst into laughter. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. I forgot the truth drug.'

He couldn't meet her eyes and he knew that his cheeks were crimson. 'That's twice I've done that today,' he whispered.

'Oh, I'm not special then?'

'I didn't mean . . .'

'Come on, give.'

'My partner, Forrester. But that wasn't real, it happened in the crystal. And . . . I don't really love her anyway. Not like that.'

The drug's requirement fulfilled, Chris looked at Kat sternly.

'Look, do you mind not asking me that sort of thing at the moment?'

'Sorry,' she said again.

A long silence ensued, during which Chris stared at his feet and wondered if the drug had revealed a few home truths to him too. He felt he didn't want to consider that yet and, with an effort, he returned his thoughts to immediate concerns.

'What are they likely to do with us?' he asked.

Kat answered solemnly. 'Anything from a caution to hanging, depending on what mood the Superior's in.'

'Hanging?'

'The Ruling Family restored capital punishment when the Great Darkness began. It means we waste less power on 91

criminals. Or rather, on those who have been labelled

“criminal”.’ Kat thought for a moment. ‘Mind you, I imagine that Enros will want you.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘Our local religious freak. He believes that the universe exists for his pleasure and that, when he dies, it will all go with him.’

‘Should be easy to prove wrong.’

‘Not in his lifetime. He practically controls this planet now.

The Superior and her Family rule in name, but Enros tells them how. They like that — belief keeps people in line more effectively than deterrents.’

‘But why is he believed?’ Chris asked. ‘There were plenty of people like him on Earth, but no one commanded that much of a following.’

‘He predicted that a Miracle would save us. Right on cue, it did. Just lucky, I guess. The thing is, Enros has always claimed that pink men would come from the sky and worship him.’

‘Aha. So if I don’t . . .?’

‘You’d shake a few faiths, that’s for sure.’

‘Perhaps he will want a word, then.’

‘Or he’ll have you disposed of in secret. It has happened.’

Chris scowled. ‘The more I hear about this planet, the less I like it.’ He knew from bitter experience how corruption could breed within the institutions of power.

‘Then you’ll help us,’ Kat said, more as a statement than as a question. She leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the forehead. The sensation was enjoyable. ‘Escape from here, I mean.’

He wasn’t sure. The Detrian authorities, he considered, had every right to detain him — and he had only Kat’s word that they weren’t benevolent. Was he letting her manipulate him into doing something rash?

Right or wrong, though, Chris decided, he did want freedom.

Unanswered questions burnt in his chest. He had to find the Doctor.

Until he had spoken to him, he couldn't fully believe his betrayal.

It was for that reason, more than any other, that Chris at last 92

answered: 'Okay. Let's go.'

Frankly, he was glad too of an excuse to tear his thoughts away from that kiss.

Mel watched in fascination as the Doctor laid out a collection of bric-a-brac on the grass, from stray paper clips to rubber bands to an apple core and a child's yo-yo with a tiger face painted on it. 'It never fails to amaze me how much junk you keep in those pockets,' she commented.

'I never know when I might need it,' the Doctor said, triumphantly producing a small green cube with a flat-screen display.

'Oh, Doctor,' Mel groaned, 'you must have been able to feel that thing. It's three inches square!'

He was already prising the box open with a screwdriver. 'As you have observed, Mel, my pockets are extraordinarily capacious.'

'What is it?'

He held the screwdriver between his teeth and rummaged in the object's internal wiring, answering through one side of his mouth. 'A rather clever device of my own devising. It generates a force field. Unfortunately, it was intended to work in conjunction with two other units.'

'But you can modify it, right?'

His eyes gleamed. 'Right.'

Stationed by the cell door, Kat'lanna could hear footsteps approaching. 'He's coming,' she whispered. Chris rolled off the bed and joined her. 'How are you feeling? No, don't answer. I don't want to hear the biological details.'

It's all right,' he said. 'The drug's almost worn off now. I should be able to join in.'

A black-clothed guard appeared at the door and stared suspiciously through the bars. 'What are you two doing?'

It's all right,' Kat said. 'My alien friend here has communicated with Enros. We have been summoned to His Presence immediately.'

'Nobody came through here.'

'They didn't need to,' Chris put in. 'I spoke to Enros telepathically. We all believe in him on the planet Wolsey.'

The guard shifted uncertainly. 'If you're telepathic, prove it.

Put something in my mind.'

'Don't be stupid!' Kat snapped. 'He can only commune with the Undying One. You have heard His Word, I hope? And His prediction of the coming of the pink-skinned offworlders?' The guard nodded hastily. Chris put on his best look of wide-eyed innocence.

Kat reached through the bars and clasped a hand onto the guard's shoulder. 'Now are you going to let us out of here or would you prefer to burn in Purgatory?'

He pulled away from her, gave a derisory snort which wasn't as confident as it might have been, then turned and swept away.

Chris sighed. 'I thought you said that would work.'

Kat grinned and dangled the guard's key in front of his eyes.

It did. Now all we have to do is let ourselves out of here and free the other rebels before the crackbrain thinks to check his pockets.'

Mel plugged her ears as the Doctor's force-field device emitted a shrill whine. 'What's going on?' she cried. The question was given more relevance by a stirring in the forest across the clearing. They hadn't heard anything in minutes and this activity seemed too well-timed to be coincidental.

The Doctor seemed worried too. He dug into the green box's innards, tearing out and reconnecting wires urgently.

The forest was fairly crying out now with the crashing movements and hunting roars of a dozen beasts. 'Turn that thing off,' Mel shrieked, 'you're attracting them!'

'That's it,' the Doctor was grumbling to himself, 'I've allowed my

neutron flow to take on the wrong —'

Mel screamed as a tyrannosaurus burst out of the trees opposite and thundered towards them, its great head down, its mouth slobbering. The Doctor only glanced up briefly before returning to his work. Mel buried her head in her knees, eyes closed. Then, unbelievably, she heard a guttural cry of surprise, and she looked up to see the dinosaur backing away, 94

bewildered, from the shimmering, transparent dome which now surrounded them.

She wiped her brow and tried to stop her hands from shaking.

'Why is it, Doctor, that everything has to be on the last second with you?' Then her relief was cut short as the tyrannosaurus swooped down and made another attack, its head bouncing of the field with a percussion that made the ground quake savagely.

'How long have we got before that thing breaks through?'

'The barrier is quite solid, but of course it was a rush job.'

'How long?' she demanded.

The Doctor shook his head gravely. 'That depends on how strong Jason thinks his dinosaurs are.'

The following ten minutes numbered amongst the most unpleasant of Mel's life. Much as she prayed it might, the tyrannosaurus didn't lose interest. It hammered against the force field time and again, and each time she thought its grinding teeth came just a little closer to its prey. Worse still, more monsters had entered the clearing, drawn by the noise. A triceratops and a velociraptor fought savagely, whilst a pterodactyl circled the treetops and squawked in hunger. A creature which Mel didn't recognize had made a few spirited attempts at levelling the barrier itself. Its charge was like that of a rhino and she had screamed each time its horned head had impacted with the solid air right next to her.

'Get ready to run,' the Doctor muttered, and her heart dipped to somewhere in the vicinity of her stomach.

'You don't mean —'

It's about to collapse.'

‘But what chance have we got of escaping?’

‘An incredibly small one. Sorry.’

Mel tensed to make a spring for it, but her body sagged as her brain informed it that flight was hopeless. She could but wait.

The field collapsed.

Mel lost all self-control and screamed.

She was still screaming when, some five seconds later, it occurred to her that she wasn’t dead. She opened her eyes to see 95

the Doctor looking apologetically down at her. The undergrowth was broken and trampled, but beyond that there was no sign of their attackers.

‘As I said,’ she panted, climbing giddily to her feet, breathless from emotional extremes, ‘always the last second.’

Then eight men leapt out from the trees, clad only in simple grass skirts and wielding wooden staffs, which they had sharpened to vicious points. Mel spun round but the men has closed in and formed a circle about them. Their expressions of anger did not bode well.

‘And why is it,’ Mel sighed, ‘that, with you, it’s always out of the frying pan and straight into the nearest, hottest and most lethal fire?’

96

11

Escape to Danger

Bernice closed her eyes and tried to chase the stars from her vision. ‘You could have stepped in before I got conked,’ she complained to Roz. ‘I’m turning into a phrenologist’s nightmare here.’

Her companion tutted as she worked on the knots binding Benny to the bed. ‘We don’t have time for your witticisms.’ She pulled the ropes free and Bernice rubbed her aching arms. ‘No time for that either. Stay as you were, pretend to be tied up.’

‘I see. You rescue me from sitting against the bedpost with my hands behind my back so I can sit against the bedpost with my hands behind my back.’

‘The difference is,’ said Roz, ‘you’ll have this.’ She pushed a snub-nosed pistol into Benny’s hand and brandished her own weapon. ‘I’ll be behind the door. Whoever comes in gets the full stun blast. If I miss —’

‘Which is a distinct possibility,’ Benny interjected unkindly.

‘— you get your chance. But make sure you take it fast. From what I’ve seen, this Dr Who guy can do most anything. Give him a second to think and we’re both cinders.’

‘More like the ugly sisters,’ Benny muttered half-heartedly.

‘Can’t you talk to these people?’ Mel pleaded as she and the Doctor were herded relentlessly through the forest. She stumbled and almost fell, but a sharp stick poked her in the back, persuading her to keep going.

‘I’m afraid their language is not developed enough for even a Time Lord’s telepathic abilities to translate,’ the Doctor said.

He seemed to be coping easily with the enforced march.

Mel sighed hopelessly, but her not inconsiderable discomfort 97

was forgotten a second later. The entourage had left the forest and she was confronted by the shattered remains of what had obviously been a primitive village. Crude log cabins had been demolished or crushed and the ground had been flattened. Her stomach turned as their journey took them past the trampled and mauled corpses of men, women and children alike. The scattered survivors greeted them with sneers and fell in with the escort party, thrusting spiked weapons towards the prisoners in accusatory gestures. Mel flinched and sought protection against the Doctor’s steadfast form.

‘The tribespeople must associate our arrival with the creatures that destroyed their settlement,’ he said sadly. ‘An understandable misapprehension in the circumstances.’

They were being pushed towards a definite destination now.

Mel’s heart sank as she saw the charred circle of ground awaiting them. Two sturdy tree-trunks were being manoeuvred into upright positions and tribesmen were gathering red creepers and testing their strength.

Sometimes, she realized, an absence of language need not be a barrier to communication.

Jason beamed as his loyal friend and super-pet padded down the corridor. Inexplicably, when it saw him, the cat froze and gave him a suspicious look. His smile turned into a frown of consternation. 'What's happened to your lovely costume, Power Puss?'

'I'm spending some time in my civilian identity,' the cat explained in the languid voice which sounded so much like a slowed-down version of Jason's own.

'Well, you'd better change back if you want to come out to Galactic Prison with us.'

'Ooh yes, I'd like that,' the cat said. But, as it spoke, it turned and scampered away. 'I'm looking forward to an adventure with

—' Its voice broke of as the animal left Jason's line of sight. He glared at the space where it had been and fire flashed in his eyes.

Dr Who was at his shoulder, although he had never approached. 'We're landing,' he said. Jason nodded and 98

accompanied his companion to the console room, where he tried to forget about his pet's betrayal.

The rough bark of the trunk rubbed against Mel's back as she struggled to break through the creepers which bound her.

Beside her, the Doctor wasn't moving at all. That made sense, she thought gloomily. What point was there? Even if they got free, they couldn't break through the circle of tribesmen.

There were dozens of them now, marching around the stakes and chanting in a low monotone. Their movements were tightly orchestrated: each time the group completed a revolution, one member would caper forward and drop sticks onto the burnt ground under the captives' feet. There was quite a pile forming now, and Mel was dreading its eventual completion.

Although she detected no signal, the tribesmen halted together and turned to their prisoners. The one who faced her barked an untranslatable order. Mel couldn't see behind her, but someone there must have collected two branches and, somehow, lit the ends of them. The torches were passed each way around the circle until they

reached the leader simultaneously. He held them over his head and gave another warbling cry as they sent red smoke into the sky.

Mel found that her eyes were glued to the flames. She fancied she could feel their heat already.

Roz tensed at the sound of footsteps. Bernice had heard them too; Roz wished the archaeologist could at least try to look natural, instead of staring wide-eyed at her with such obvious apprehension.

The door was pushed open, so that Roz was hidden behind it.

As it closed behind the newcomer, she recognized the back view of the Doctor's double. 'We've arrived at the jail,' he told Bernice.

Roz stepped out behind him and fired.

Dr Who crumpled with a gasp and she leapt into the corridor, alert for an attack. She relaxed when she saw that nobody was there. 'One down,' she announced with satisfaction.

Benny was kneeling on the floor by the space where Dr Who 99

had fallen. He was nowhere in sight. 'Or not,' she countered.

'I thought you were going to get the prisoner,' said Jason, turning in surprise as Dr Who emerged from the TARDIS. 'In a moment,' he said. 'What's wrong?'

Jason scowled and indicated the silent prison guard who stood nearby. 'According to this man, the Doctor and his girl have gone.'

'We don't know what happened sir,' the hapless officer put in. 'Their cells are locked but they aren't in them.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' Dr Who snapped. 'People don't just vanish.'

'I suppose not, sir.'

'What is the problem with this place?' Jason shouted. He clenched his fists and fought down the tide of anger which rose in his chest. He looked to Dr Who imploringly. 'Why can't anything go right?'

'Steady on Jason,' Dr Who said. 'They can't go far, can they?

There's nowhere to run to.' The faint roar of a tyrannosaurus drifted into their hearing. 'And if they've been foolish enough to try, then

they've probably been eaten.' He smiled encouragingly.

Jason was only slightly consoled. 'I want to look for them,'

he said, and Dr Who nodded understandingly. With a determined expression, Jason headed for the exit and his favourite creation followed.

Behind them, the prison guard vanished.

Mel screamed as the ground shook and something bayed in the forest. The circle of tribesmen broke apart, fear showing on each of its constituents' faces. 'Those creatures,' she said weakly. 'The dinosaurs . . .'

'Our friend must be back.'

Mel strained to see behind her and screamed again. A great tyrannosaurus head loomed over the treetops and glared at the village balefully. Their captors were fleeing the already decimated settlement, or in some cases just running in aimless panic. Mel tried to take comfort, at least, from the revocation of 100

one unpleasant fate. She needn't have. The tribe leader was before them again, and although he had dropped one torch, the other still blazed fiercely in his grasp. He yelled incomprehensible, defiant words and flung the makeshift lighter into the kindling before joining the evacuation.

'Doctor . . .' Mel moaned, as the wood began to smoulder.

He didn't say anything. Mel heard the dinosaur stomp closer, felt the creepers chafing at her wrists and realized that she probably wouldn't even have time to burn to death.

'Grey corridor,' Benny muttered. The scanner image completed its rotation. 'And more grey corridor!'

'We're in the Galactic Prison building,' said Roz.

'The what?'

'It's where the Doctor is.'

'Well let's go and find him.'

'No, wait a minute. What about the two weirdos?'

Bernice shrugged. ‘Dr Who could be out of the picture.’

‘I doubt it. He disappeared on me once before. And if he might still be in the TARDIS, we can’t risk leaving.’

‘Tell you what, you stay on guard, I’ll scout round and see if I can find anyone.’ The older woman made to protest, but Benny’s confinement had left her itching for action —

especially if it involved revenge for her latest bruise. ‘I won’t be long! Not much can happen in an empty grey corridor.’ She opened the door and strode outside.

Bernice emerged into a forest clearing and froze at the sight of ten tons of velociraptor bearing down on her.

* * *

Mel coughed as a wisp of smoke reached into her throat. Her right foot was hot and she tried to curl it around the stake for protection. The fire was definitely starting to take.

‘It’s the heat, you see,’ the Doctor said. ‘It dries the creepers and makes them contract. The nearer we come to death, the harder it is to escape.’

‘I don’t need chapter and verse, Doctor.’

‘Harder,’ he continued, ‘but not impossible.’ Mel struggled to 101

look at him and grinned as she saw that he had freed himself. ‘I studied with Houdini. It’s simple to shrug off the ropes, the hard part is the timing.’

‘Then I hope it’s the right time to free me. I’m getting the proverbial hot foot down here!’ The attacking dinosaur bellowed its rage again and, as the Doctor worked on her bonds, Mel blinked away heat-coaxed tears and craned her neck to look at it. She regretted that move as she saw it toss its head back and gulp down a native whole. She was repulsed and yet, at the same time, grateful that the tribesmen had provided more attractive targets than their stationary prisoners. The thought made her sick.

‘Come on,’ the Doctor muttered in her ear. The creepers loosened and fell. He took her hand and dragged her from the pyre. ‘While it’s occupied, let’s go.’

Roz heard Bernice's shocked gasp and sprang for the door, even as her friend propelled herself away from it and collided with her. The pair clung onto each other to avoid falling and Roz lurched out into the open and registered the velociraptor's horribly fast approach. She pushed her friend aside and went for her gun, discharging it and praying she could hit the thing's eyes. She got its mouth instead, the charge impacting with the back of its throat. The beast screeched painfully and veered from its course, bypassing the TARDIS and collapsing into a squealing heap. Fluke shot it may have been, but Roz glowed visibly as she reholstered her weapon.

'No grey corridors,' said Benny distantly, picking herself up out of the dirt. 'How come we're in "The Land That Time Forgot" all of a sudden?'

'Let's find out.' Roz headed for the tree line with a swagger.

She faltered at the rumblings of animal noises from beyond it.

Benny joined her and they peered into the forest together. 'I don't like the sound of those things much.'

'We'll be all right,' Roz said uncertainly, 'so long as we know where to run to.' She turned to nod at the TARDIS, but caught her breath at the sight of the expansive brick wall behind her.

Bernice looked too and the women exchanged a long-suffering glance. It seems our prison's back,' said Benny.

'Pardon me for being cynical, but shouldn't we be inside it?'

Dr Who followed Jason through the forest, both heedless of the dinosaurs which, after all, had been taught only to eat criminals.

Jason was in a dark mood. 'What's the point of prison if it can't hold the most evil man in the universe?' he grumbled. 'Perhaps when we catch him again, we should kill him.'

At that moment, four grass-skirted men shot out of the trees and skidded to a horrified stop, their fear of whatever they ran from temporarily balanced by that of the strangers. The group split, each man running for his own life, and Jason launched himself instinctively at the nearest, who shrieked and clawed at his attacker as they crashed to the ground.

‘We’re looking for a pair of escaped criminals,’ he said threateningly, pinning the savage down.

‘He can’t speak our language,’ Dr Who said as the captive struggled and grunted unintelligibly.

Jason faltered, then reached into his pocket and produced an impossibly large, ovoid console, labelled ‘UNIVERSAL

TRANSLATOR’. ‘Where,’ he said, speaking slowly and firmly into the device, ‘are the prisoners?’

The tribesman stared at him blankly, then uttered something which Jason took to be an answer. He waited eagerly as the translator clicked and hummed. Then a message appeared on its display:

‘Ugg (grunt) tree, not-us (grunt) ooog.’

Jason screamed and hurled the device at the nearest tree. It hit hard and evaporated; the primitive took advantage of the distraction to flee.

Dr Who placed a hand on his companion’s shoulder. ‘They were obviously running from the dinosaurs,’ he said. ‘They must have attacked their village.’

‘So?’

‘If there’s a civilization here, that’s where the Doctor will be.’

‘Of course,’ said Jason, brightening. ‘He would have tried to form the natives into an army against us, wouldn’t he?’

‘I’m sure he would.’

‘So we go where they came from,’ said Jason, setting of at a jog.

‘Get down!’ the Doctor hissed, knocking Mel bodily into the undergrowth. They scrambled behind a tree and waited. When nothing happened, Mel drew breath to complain. But then she heard footsteps and realized how acute the Doctor’s senses must be.

‘It’s them,’ she whispered as Dr Who and Jason trotted into view. She felt the Doctor relax as the pair hurried by and out of sight. ‘Why didn’t we jump them?’

He shook his head. ‘Jason’s powers are growing as more fictional energy enters the universe. It would be too dangerous to confront him openly.’

‘But we can’t let him walk free!’

The Doctor stood up and walked briskly back the way his double had come. ‘I don’t intend to. But if we can get to the TARDIS, we can strand him on this planet — at least, until he thinks of creating a fictional ship. By that time, we’ll have returned to the rift and sealed it. Jason’s abilities will wane as he exhausts a finite power source.’

‘I followed about a quarter of that,’ said Mel, running to keep up.

‘I never thought grey corridors could look so good,’ said Roz as, after ten minutes of concentrated blaster fire on a barred entrance, she and Benny all but fell into the prison building.

They advanced, guns ready, along a row of bolted doors.

‘I’d prefer a glimpse of blue panelling,’ said Benny. ‘How do we get to the TARDIS?’

‘I didn’t exactly get my bearings when we were last there.’ A blackboard by one door caught Roz’s attention. In a yellow chalk scrawl, it announced: ‘THE FEROCIOUS FROG MAN.

Five Years for Attempted Galactic Domination’. She eyed the viewing hatch curiously, but decided she didn’t want to know.

‘What if Dr Who’s taken it?’

‘Even if he has, he’ll be back. He still has Cwej to find. And 104

one other, I think.’

‘And in the meantime?’

‘You can reach for the skies,’ someone suggested.

Two armed prison officers had appeared behind them.

Dr Who sighed deeply as he and Jason arrived at the village’s remains. ‘More lives lost,’ he observed sadly. He clicked his fingers and the distant roars ceased.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Turning off your guard dogs. You should have been more careful.’

‘I don’t see why,’ said Jason petulantly. ‘Those primitives were about to side with the Doctor. They deserve all they got.’

‘Maybe.’ Dr Who halted before a large, crackling fire; it took Jason a moment to register the blackened stakes at its heart. ‘It’s no wonder they were frightened of me,’ said Dr Who. ‘They thought I was burning here.’

‘But no one’s there now.’ A dreadful thought occurred to Jason and he turned to his friend with wide eyes. ‘The TARDIS!’

‘That seems likely.’

‘We’ve got to get back there!’

The Doctor raced down the grey corridors of Galactic Prison, Mel close behind. He grinned as he skidded round the last corner and the familiar shape of the TARDIS appeared. ‘I’ve missed the old girl.’ He hurried to it, rummaging in his pockets.

‘But we’re not out of trouble yet. Not until we seal that rift.’

‘Then hurry, Doctor!’

He produced his key and pushed it into the lock.

Unexpectedly, electricity coursed through his arm and the air exploded, catapulting him into the far wall to the accompaniment of Mel’s screaming.

She was by his side in seconds and he tried to assure her that he was all right, merely winded. But the shock’s minor physical effects were more than outweighed by the disappointment of failure.

‘Some sort of booby trap?’

He nodded ruefully. ‘A fictitious one. Our friend has more foresight than I expected.’ The Doctor cursed in GalIifreyan.

Just when this nightmare had seemed to be ending . . .

‘Well, can you defuse it?’

‘Unlikely,’ he said, allowing her to help him up. ‘The usual physical laws don’t apply. If Jason said he wanted an

“impenetrable lock”, then that’s what he’s got.’

‘I hope you’re not telling me we’re stranded,’ Mel said, an old fear visible through her confident expression.

The Doctor answered gravely. ‘Unless we can outwit Jason, that’s exactly what we are.’

12

Never That Simple

‘Look,’ said Roz irritably, ‘how many corridors are you planning to march us down?’ Her arms were aching from keeping her hands behind her head and she was sick of the sight of grey paint. The guards answered only by prodding their rifles into her back. She scowled.

‘How’s your sense of direction?’ asked Benny. ‘I haven’t a clue where the ship is.’

‘Left at the second junction and straight ahead.’ The Doctor breezed into view, that weak woman from the TARDIS beside him. Roz gaped as the guards swung their rifles to cover him.

‘Don’t worry, they aren’t under Jason’s direct control and their programming won’t be detailed enough to cope with resistance.’ He headed for a side corridor and the three women fell cautiously into step with him.

The guards unleashed a volley of blaster fire.

‘On the other hand . . .’ the Doctor said sheepishly as they hit the floor.

Roz was already in action. She rolled, unholstered her gun and let off six blasts in return. She missed, but the guards stopped firing anyway. They looked momentarily bemused, then turned and marched off. The Doctor bounced back up and grinned. ‘I see your aim hasn’t improved much.’ She opened her mouth to object but he was like a hyperactive whirlwind.

‘Now, Benny and Roz meet Mel. Mel, Benny and Roz. Clear?

Good. We’ve places to go.

‘You said the TARDIS was the other way,’ Roz pointed out as the Doctor set off at a trot.

‘That’s not where we’re going. Come on.’

Darnak arrived at the detention area and nodded to the two 107

guards who flanked the security door. ‘How are the prisoners?’

‘They’re quiet, Politik.’

‘When did you last check?’

‘A half-seg ago. No problems.’

‘Good.’ Darnak looked over his shoulder, then drew the senior guard conspiratorially to one side. ‘You have the alien in there? His presence has been requested.’ The guard understood.

‘And that of the leader’s sister.’ Darnak flinched at the memory of the contempt in the Superior’s voice as she proclaimed that, in Mortannis’s ‘regrettable’ absence, Kat’lanna would have to serve.

‘They are in the same cell, Politik.’

‘Well, that’s convenient. I thought we could do it like this: you take me to see them, I’ll pretend to be a sympathizer. I’ll slip them the keys, you take an early break and I’ll tell the cult to have someone stationed in Streets 23 and 24.’ The guard acknowledged these instructions without surprise. This wasn’t the first arranged exchange of prisoners. By doing it this way, the authorities could deny their involvement with Enros, although that was an open secret anyway.

The guard instructed his subordinate to hand his keys to Darnak, then he turned to the security door and unlocked it himself. Neither he nor Darnak saw the expression of horror which crossed the other man’s face as he searched his pockets in vain.

Darnak had one second to register the presence of eighteen rebels in the detention corridor. Then the senior guard was pushed into him and both tumbled, Darnak’s shriek cut of as a flailing armoured elbow filled his mouth.

One explosion of chaos later, a boot struck his head and his world blossomed into bright yellow, fading to black.

The Doctor led the way into a circular room in which three streamlined, plastic spacecraft lay. Roz glanced at their flashy, red- and white-striped hulls and snorted: 'They aren't ships, they're toys!'

'Be glad they're here at all. We have Jason's imagination to thank for that.'

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'I take it he's connected with the Land of Fiction?' Bernice surmised. She had been thinking over events and, given the White Knight's appearance in particular, that seemed logical.

'He used to be its Master.' The Doctor approached the nearest shuttle and Melanie, Bernice and Roslyn followed, their footsteps clanging on the metal floor.

'We're not back there, are we?'

'Worse than that. This is real.' He reached up and operated a door control in the shuttle's rear section. Roz went first, hauling herself over the rim and into the vessel's cramped interior.

Benny looked on doubtfully. 'Isn't there any way we could get into the TARDIS? You had some control over fictional energy last time.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'That was in the Land itself, where there was plenty of it. Here, the energy is channelling exclusively through Jason, attracted to him by his experience at wielding it.' Benny watched as Mel clambered through the hatch. Her mind ticked, pondering their predicament.

'If we could get back to the crystal, would there be enough energy there for you to —?'

'Meet Jason on an almost even footing. Precisely. Better still, we can seal the rift before he arrives and deprive him of his powers.'

Benny smiled. The Doctor was three steps ahead, as usual.

Five minutes later, she was squashed into a plastic chair, her knees pressed against the one in front, on which the Doctor sat.

He was helping Roz, to his right, puzzle out the controls, which

consisted in the main of joystick, accelerator and brake handle.

Benny suppressed the urge to scream that this thing couldn't possibly fly and they should get out before it fell over.

Beside her, the woman called Mel seemed intent on starting a conversation. Not the best thing for her nerves. 'How long have you known the Doctor?'

'Forever. You?'

'Long enough. I met him in his last regeneration.'

Benny was interested despite herself. 'What was he like?'

'Irascible and unpredictable. But I kept him in check.'

'I bet you did,' she said, and meant it. The Doctor was suddenly in between them, squashing her against the hull as he crawled awkwardly towards the hatch and dropped out with a clang. He had left Roz hunched over the stick.

'He's changed, even since the regeneration. He's become so secretive.'

'That's the Doctor for you.'

'Not my Doctor!' Mel nodded towards their pilot and dropped her voice to a whisper. 'He wouldn't have let someone like that in the TARDIS. A gun-toting killer!'

Benny bridled. 'Wouldn't he?'

Mel seemed oblivious to the edge in her voice. 'Which reminds me, what do you know about the Althosian System? I asked the Doctor about it and he changed the subject.'

'Oh, the Seven Planets.' Benny spoke casually. 'He helped a Time Lord friend of his destroy them, killed billions of people.

But that was all ages ago.' She chided herself for so enjoying Mel's reaction of horror. She leaned over Roz's shoulder on the pretext of asking how she was getting on, and deliberately turned so that Mel could see the pistol in her back pocket.

The Doctor scrambled back into his seat and announced:

‘We’d better leave. I’ve just set off every alarm in the building.’

‘You’ve what?’

‘We need Jason to remember us. I don’t want him for this fictional shuttle whilst we’re out in space.’

‘But he’ll come after us!’ protested Mel.

‘Then I suggest we hurry. Ready, Roz?’

‘I can’t work out how to open the bay doors.’

‘I suspect they’re automatic.’

‘”Suspect” doesn’t sound good.’

The Doctor reached for the dashboard and flicked a switch labelled BLAST OFF. Benny squealed as the g-force of sudden vertical acceleration crushed her into her seat.

The abandoned theatre was cold and damp. It was situated in a part of the city which subsidence had all but blocked off. A subterranean wind whistled through the openings which punctured its walls. It had been the rebels’ first base, before 110

Mortannis had gained confidence and moved them to riskier but more hospitable locations.

In the shadows of its stalls now, Kat shivered and counted her friends by the scant light of four candles. All told, there were eighteen, including Christopher. They had been unable to find many of their friends. She wasn’t sure who had escaped the initial purge and who had vanished in custody. She knew that her brother was amongst the latter. She didn’t know what to think about Thruskarr. Deep inside, she was almost glad that he and Chris had not met.

‘I wish they hadn’t taken my gun,’ said Chris. He was seated beside her on a gutted chair, alert for danger in every shadow.

‘You carry a gun? Only the security forces have them here.’

‘Yes, well, I was in their equivalent on Earth.’

‘They must have been more benevolent.’

‘Not really.’ She detected a hint of bitterness in his answer.

‘But you did something about it?’ His expression remained solemn and Kat felt disappointed in him. ‘Then how can you hope to change things on my world?’ Chris shrugged. Kat sighed. ‘Can’t go home because they took our names, can’t attack with so few people. I don’t know why we bothered escaping. I thought you’d have a plan.’

‘I’m trying to think what the Doctor would do.’

‘And I thought you’d stopped holding him up as a role model!’

‘He usually wins!’

Kat groaned and surveyed the demoralized troops. ‘They’re expecting me to take over. Where’s my brother when I need him?’ The rebels had gathered in small groups, some talking in low voices, others silent. They were awaiting her orders.

Mortannis’s sister, their rescuer. What could she say? ‘So what would the Doctor do now?’

Chris was uncertain. ‘I suppose he’d gather the rebels together.’

‘Done that. All eighteen. What next?’

‘We need the others. We need your brother. And what about the people who escaped the round-up?’

‘They’ve probably run home where it’s safe,’ said Kat.

‘Either that or they’ve gone over to Enros.’

‘But they must still be willing. If we kicked up enough fuss, they’d join in, wouldn’t they?’

‘So what do you think we should do? Attack?’

‘Maybe.’

‘And die, like the lizards?’

‘No!’

‘What, then?’

Chris buried his face as though the effort of thinking was too much.

Kat pulled one of his hands away and stroked it tenderly.

She hadn't meant to vent her frustrations on him.

'I think the Doctor would have found their weaknesses,' he said finally. 'He would have marshalled your troops in the most efficient way possible and attacked the rulers at the optimum moment. I'm not him. I'm sorry, I don't know how much help I can be. I'll try.'

'I shouldn't expect miracles,' Kat said. 'This is our fight, not yours.'

'But there must be a way to win. The Doctor would have found it!'

'Perhaps he considers people expendable?'

'We've got somewhere, at least!' said Chris. He sounded angry. Was he still feeling defensive about the man who had betrayed him? 'So long as we're free and alive, there's hope.'

'Excuse me,' interrupted a small voice, 'aren't you Mortannis's sister?'

'Ryallen?' She recognized the new arrival, even in the darkness. His angular features were distinctive and Kat remembered Mort introducing him at their first rebel meeting.

Suspicion crept over her. 'I don't remember seeing you in the cell block.'

'They're behind us,' said Roz. She punched up a rear view on the main screen: the police box shell of the TARDIS, spinning on its axis as it hurtled through the black smear of hyperspace.

'Vandal!' the Doctor spat. 'Joyrider! The old thing isn't designed for those kinds of stresses.' He shook his head in 112

annoyance and turned to Roz. 'Press the "normal space"

button.'

'This ship is unbelievable!'

'So long as one person believes it . . .'

She did as he bade her, and suddenly they could see stars again. 'As simple as that,' she said, impressed.

'At this speed, we're only ten minutes from Detrios.' The Doctor

inspected the surrounding constellations with satisfaction. ‘That’s the advantage of having a fictional vehicle.

Performance is improved no end when reality isn’t a constraint.’

Roz had set the scanner onto a rotating search pattern. It was with a dull acceptance that she greeted the sight of the TARDIS

again. ‘They’re out of hyperspace and closing at three o’clock.’

‘They can’t be trying to ram us!’ exclaimed Mel.

‘Looks like it,’ said Benny.

‘Not bloody likely!’ vowed Roz. She allowed the box to come a measured distance closer, then she slammed the joystick and sent the shuttle into an upward spiral. As it levelled out, the instruments showed that the TARDIS had passed beneath them.

‘I can do that all the way to Detrios if necessary.’

‘Not if my stomach gets a vote,’ Benny said weakly.

Roz avoided a second attack run, ignoring the queasy protests from behind. She couldn’t help but think of her partner: Cwej would have been in his element with these manoeuvres. She hoped he was all right. They were not often separated for so long and she knew that he needed looking after.

‘I think they’ve given up. They’re just following again.’

The grey sphere of Detrios was in view and approaching at a phenomenal speed. A point of bright light beside it marked the Miracle’s location. The Doctor allowed himself a grin. ‘I think this might work.’

Just like that, things fell apart.

Ryallen had his left arm around Kat’s throat. His right hand was holding a long, curved, ornamental knife and Chris knew it would only take one flick of his wrist to kill her. Kat knew it too; she was keeping as quiet and still as she could.

Her captor backed towards the exit. The other rebels had 113

become aware of the situation, but none dared move. Chris followed Ryallen, careful not to appear threatening. ‘What do you want with

her?'

'She is required by the Undying One.'

'And you'll do anything for him, I suppose?'

'His is the lifespan of the cosmos. When he dies, all die.

When he is obeyed, then order prevails.'

'You believe that? I mean, "Enros". It's not even an impressive name, is it? Hardly born to godhood.'

His attempt to distract Ryallen from Kat'lanna failed. 'You will believe,' the cultist said, his grip as strong as ever. 'You will both see the light.' He had almost reached the arched doorway. Chris swallowed as two cloaked, hooded figures appeared behind him. Fear rippled audibly through the rebels. A glance confirmed that the other entrances were similarly occupied.

Chris cursed his own short-sightedness. Kat had told him that many of her colleagues had defected, particularly in the wake of the lizards' destruction. They would know of this place, and of all the rebels' secrets. With the rulers in Enros's pocket too, his followers would soon have been appraised of the escape.

In a burst of clarity, Chris knew then what the Doctor would have done. He would have moved against the cult, swept Enros from power and brought this whole society crashing down. As simple as that. But too late now.

'I suggest you give yourself up,' said Ryallen. 'If you fight, this girl dies.'

'And so might you. There are twenty of us.' Chris knew that was an exaggeration. He doubted too that the others would commit to such a hopeless gesture.

'We do not fear death. We have been promised an afterlife.'

Ryallen traced a line across Kat's skin with the knife point. 'But if the uninitiated perish, then they burn in the fires of his wrath.'

Kat closed her eyes; not before Chris saw fear in them.

'This need not concern your comrades. Enros wants you and the girl. If he can't have you alive, he will settle for everyone in this place dead.'

She wasn't expendable. Chris knew that he would sooner die than have her harmed. The strength of that resolution scared him. His throat dried and he felt the cold more keenly than before:

The cloaked figures swept across the theatre to converge upon him. The others backed out of their path; they valued their lives too much to risk all for an offworlder.

He was running out of options.

'I hope I don't see what I think I see.' Bernice squeezed between the Doctor and Roslyn, in a way which Roz found annoyingly distracting. The screen was monitoring the TARDIS's progress and it was to this image that Benny drew attention.

The Doctor stiffened as he saw it too. Then he pushed Roz to one side, gripped the joystick and pulled it hard left. She was about to protest when the ship was buffeted. A front view showed twin blaster beams crackling into the distance. They had passed too close for comfort, grazing the hull.

'They're trying to shoot us down,' she observed in disbelief.

'Don't tell me you've added weapons to the TARDIS!' Mel said, disgusted.

'We haven't,' the Doctor growled. 'But Jason has.' Roz switched back to a rear view. She could see them now: stubby protuberances on each side of the box. As she watched, red fire flashed in their muzzles.

'Hold on!' she shouted, throwing them down and right. The ship rocked again as the bolts ripped by.

'Three minutes to landing,' the Doctor reported.

'How long can you keep this up?' Mel bleated.

'As long as I have to,' said Roz grimly.

She concentrated on the scene behind them, alert for the next shot.

The two smart bolts sped towards the surface of Detrios. Then, as their creator had determined, they swerved up and round and screamed back towards the stolen shuttle and the fleeing criminals within. They hit square and hard and, oblivious to the 115

vacuum as Jason had imagined they would be, sent furious sound waves rippling out to all those close enough to hear. The ship's innards blossomed into a fiery orange and showered the pursuing vessel with a fine spray of burning plastic shreds.

When it was all over, there was nothing left — only the victorious TARDIS and the vacuum, silent once again.

The enemies of Dr Who had met their deserved fates.

13

Salvation

Chris woke from his worst dream yet and cried out as white light stabbed into his tender retinas. For a second, he thought of the Security Chief's interrogation and he kicked instinctively.

His feet were free and his boot met flesh. His senses were returning piecemeal and he heard a yelp and felt ropes chafing at his wrists (hands tied behind his back?). Unwilling muscles reacted to commands (got to get out of here!) and he lurched to his feet and back across a room he couldn't see. The memory of Kat's face clouded his vision: her bald head, graphite skin and strangely appealing eyes; her expression of concern as he woke in the cell, a stranger in trouble. He had to save her. He knew it was too late.

Two figures were coming for him, red blurs on a yellow background. He couldn't make out words, just the muted buzz of conversation. But, as they came closer, he recognized the shorter man.

'Doctor,' Chris rasped (throat too dry), 'where . . .?'

'Take it easy, boy.' (Why does he have those question marks on his pullover? Chris thought as his focus sharpened.) 'You're in the TARDIS. I rescued you from that horrible planet and now we can blow the whole place up.'

Chris swayed as the figures moved closer. All at once, the Doctor's words sank in and he remembered the mission he'd been sent on, the consequences he had not been warned of and Kat's face, laughing as she played with his hair.

'You bastard!' Chris yelled, the effort extreme as he wrenched the

words out hoarsely. He lunged at the man who had betrayed him, but his arms provided, a. painful reminder of the ropes which bound them. Chris lost his balance, tumbled 117

into the Time Lord and hit the floor with no way of cushioning his fall.

His last thought was of Kat's face again: her expression of hopelessness as the cultists dragged her away to die. But the image was washed out with light and Chris took refuge beneath a shroud of memories.

Enros was the most unpleasant of those hazy recollections. The sight of him had triggered revulsion in Chris's stomach. But that was later. The first time, the cult leader had been hidden by shadows: a hypnotic voice drifting out from a jewel-encrusted alcove, a vague shape cowering on a recessed throne at the top end of the opulent Great Hall. 'I have been awaiting the pleasure of your company.'

'What do you want with us?' asked Chris.

'I hoped you might have heard of me already.'

'I have. But —'

Enros seized on that. 'You see?' He addressed his followers, who stood behind and to each side of the captive pair. 'My Word has spread throughout the cosmos.'

'Blessed be,' the cultists answered in unison. Chris shivered at their thoughtless dedication (like his to the Doctor? Was he as blind in his own way?).

'I assume, then, that you have travelled to Detrios in order to pay homage to my greatness.' Chris opened his mouth to reply, but Enros continued: 'Or are you, perhaps, an alien emissary of darkness come to wage Holy War?'

'Well neither, actually.'

'Be warned. Those who displease me must perish. This very morning, the heathen lizards of Detrios were struck down in retribution for their godless ways. Be sure that you are not next.'

'What do you want exactly?' asked Kat.

'I require you to serve me. You, the alien, will tell the masses how I

am revered beyond this world. You, the rebel, will instruct your followers to lay down their weapons and join my cause.'

Chris bristled. 'And suppose,' he said, 'we happen to think —

just a hypothetical question, this — that you're a spineless worm hiding behind an army of idiots?'

He heard Kat sucking air in through her teeth, but he was sure that he was on safe ground. They were too valuable for Enros to risk losing yet.

'You are required to show respect!' the cult leader spat. 'I have lived for many centuries on this planet and it is through my continuing existence that the universe endures. Should I decide it is no longer worth the effort of maintaining reality, then reality will die alongside me.'

'Prove it!' Kat challenged, emboldened by Chris's defiance.

Enros's voice remained controlled, but Chris detected a measure of disdain. 'Remove these non-believers.' The robed figures closed in obediently and, given the force of numbers against them, Chris felt it was unwise to resist.

'You will spend three segments in custody,' Enros pronounced as Kat and Chris were taken away, 'during which time you will reconsider your beliefs. If you decide to serve me, then you will be welcome additions to my flock. If not . . . well, then you will be equally welcome additions to my compost heap.'

This time, there were no bars. They sat on the stone floor of a dirty alcove, the traitor Ryallen standing guard in the doorway.

Kat regarded him with loathing. 'Why did you betray us?'

'I received a Higher Calling,' he said without emotion.

'What, from that egotistical moron out there?'

'You won't feel that way after your exorcism. I look forward to serving my Lord by helping cleanse your tainted souls.'

Kat shuffled around to present him with her back. Ryallen snorted and turned away. Chris whispered urgently to his fellow captive:

‘Exorcism?’

‘The cult worked out that the Devil is allergic to wood and iron oxide. So if anyone has a demon inside them, the best cure is to put some rusty nails into a plank and beat them to death.’

‘Oh.’

‘Any ideas?’

‘The way I see it,’ said Chris, ‘we have three choices. One: 119

we die. Not recommended. Two: we escape.’

‘Which might lead us back to “one”,’ said Kat.

‘Or three: Enros will spare us if we say we believe in him. So why don’t we — and here’s a really off-the-wall suggestion —

say "We believe in Enros"?’ I’ve been hanging around Bernice too long, he thought as he said it.

Kat shook her head. ‘Once we allow Enros to get his claws into us, we might as well be dead. You especially. He won’t give you the chance to escape until you’ve been up on a few soapboxes, preaching to the non-believers.’

‘Hmmm. I couldn’t do that. Not lure more people into this.’

‘So it’s “hello rusty nails”,’ said Kat gloomily.

‘Unless we try for option two,’ said Chris. ‘There is only one guard, after all.’ Escaping, he recalled, was the one thing they had got right last time.

‘That’s one more than they need. This place is a labyrinth, crawling with brainwashed zombies. There are two ways out: conversion and death. Nobody’s managed any other.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Chris, casting around for an idea, ‘we could steal some robes? Put up the hoods and pretend to be cultists?’

‘Oh yeah,’ Kat said reproachfully. ‘Like no one’s thought of that!’

‘It seems to me,’ Chris pressed on, a little put out by her attitude, ‘that Enros’s greatest weapon is fear. He’s built up his own legend so that people think he’s invincible.’

‘Nobody’s proved otherwise.’

‘Then it’s time we did. Let’s get out of here. But, instead of fleeing, let’s go back to the Great Hall. We can show everyone how tough Enros really is!’

Kat’lanna wanted to believe — Chris could see that in her eyes — but still, she was reluctant to take the risk.

He nodded towards Ryallen and lowered his voice. ‘It does mean we get to slug him.’

A smile tugged at Kat’s mouth. ‘I’m certainly warming to the idea.’

Floating; reality’s harshness dragging him upwards. Chris railed against that, preferring to stay inside the bittersweet 120

dreamworld. But his eyes opened, bringing into view a pink blob which resolved itself into the Doctor’s face.

‘Betrayed . . .’ Chris whispered. He strained to reach out but his arms were heavy, pinning him to the soft mattress (his own bed), muscles aching.

‘You were taken in by a rather clever conman, I’m afraid,’ the Doctor said kindly. ‘It was my own evil doppelgänger. He was the one who told you to destroy Detrios.’

‘Evil . . .’ Chris repeated faintly.

The next time he awoke, the Doctor’s face was gone and there was only the white light. He screwed up his eyes against it, but although he felt exhausted and sick, the world refused to leave him alone.

Eventually, he gave in. He pushed back the sheets, dimly registering that he was fully clothed. The world spun as he hoisted himself upright. Then Chris’s mind drifted and he found himself leaning against a wall in the corridor outside, making his way towards the console room with his brain on auto-pilot.

He tried to operate the TARDIS: a mad idea, his senses screamed. It was far too complex for even a rational man to handle without the Doctor’s experience — Q’ell had taught him that. Chris wasn’t feeling rational right now. He wanted to get back to Detrios, to Kat’lanna. Failing that, he wanted to be out of this madhouse and away from the Doctor and his heartless gloating about the planet’s fate as arranged

by his own hands.

He pulled at levers and punched buttons desperately — and his stomach lurched as the room tipped sideways and he hurtled into the Doctor's hatstand, bruising his skull.

Either Chris blacked out or the Doctor appeared from thin air, rushing about the console with an expression of concern. The TARDIS righted but Chris's stomach remained at ninety degrees to the rest of his body. He coughed and was almost sick on the floor. Then he tried to get up to reach the controls again, but he felt as though powerful hands were pushing him back down and into dreams and memories once more.

Time shifted, patterned with kaleidoscopic colours.

They were in the Great Hall, Chris nursing bruised knuckles: 121

frustration had made him overzealous in despatching Ryallen (he denied to himself that he might have been trying to impress Kat'lanna). There was one problem: the alcove, and Enros's throne, were empty.

'What do we do now?' asked Kat.

He was at a loss. 'Make a run for it? Hide until he comes back?'

She didn't answer. Chris saw why. She was staring over his shoulder, eyes like saucers. He knew what he would see before he turned.

'You didn't imagine I would be unprepared for such an attack?' said Enros quietly, as he stepped from the shadows.

Chris and Kat kept very still, believing implicitly that the mad God would use his pistol at the slightest provocation. 'I am omnipotent, after all. My eyes see everywhere.' More likely they had tripped an alarm, Chris thought, and given Enros time to seek concealment.

His own eyes were rooted upon the man himself: not the image of a deity, more that of a corpse. Looking at Enros, he could see how he might well have existed for, if not centuries, then at least some decades longer than his contemporaries. His skin was festering, sliding off grey bones as it mouldered to paste. He was only held together at all by a gleaming silver exo-skeleton, which seemed to comprise at least two-thirds of his body. Between metal ribs, Chris glimpsed horrific brown misshapes suspended in a greenish liquid. A rubber device like a pair of bellows expanded and contracted in the chest

area, controlling the monstrosity's respiration.

'And I thought your followers were zombies!' said Kat.

'My appearance,' Enros stated, 'is an unfortunate side effect of my divine immortality.'

'Divine?' Kat scoffed. 'The only secret to your extended life is money. You take what you can from your followers and use it on surgery and cybernetics to keep your own miserable self alive!'

Her anger was beginning to overcome her sense. Chris squeezed her arm to pull her back from the brink. It was too 122

late.

Enros clicked his fingers and six cloaked figures appeared from the Great Hall. Three clustered about Kat and seized her despite her frenzied objections. 'You are beyond redemption,'

said Enros solemnly. 'You will be executed, your corpse hung above the entrance to our church as a disincentive to your misguided followers.'

Chris cried out and reached for her but the other cultists had moved in, pinning his arms to his sides. Enros was saying something, no doubt offering one last chance for salvation. All he had to do was say he believed, add the considerable weight of his alien heritage to Enros's crusade. That way, he could live.

But Chris had eyes only for Kat's lithe form, ferociously struggling as she was dragged out of his life forever. His gaze lingered even after she was out of sight. Then he felt the sharp, precise pain of a needle point entering his thigh and that, coupled with the fear of what they might have done to him, refocused his attention onto Enros.

The cult leader sounded almost disappointed. 'You will prove valuable to me one way or another. I had hoped you would stand by me, proclaiming my interplanetary fame. Instead, you will just have to die on the altar, to fuel my followers' faith in their Lord and deter those who would strive against me.' The words started to echo as Chris found his concentration failing.

Enros gave a harsh laugh. 'And, of course, the organs you donate to me will be put to good use.'

Chris's thoughts lost all cohesion: his memories drifted, pulled apart on a sluggish tide.

Kat's face. Her expression of hopelessness. Dragged away to die.

All his fault. Why hadn't he listened to her caution?

Chris moaned and retreated into deeper slumber. The guilt didn't hurt so much there.

The crystal was beautiful. It twinkled with a thousand lights, illuminating the black sky as it looked benignly down on its sheep.

123

He was lying on his back on a stone altar, in the cultist's Great Hall, hovering between consciousness and sleep. He hadn't noticed the hole before, directly above him; the crystal above that. A direct line to the cultist's Miracle.

He dreamed a few minutes more and, when he next sensed reality, it was with curiosity at the realization that his shirt had been stripped from his chest. Ropes bit into his wrists and ankles. It reminded him of a vidfilm, but he couldn't think which one. It didn't matter. Chris was happy to be here. He was having a nice dream, on the whole.

He awoke, next time, to the sound of chanting. A low, mournful tune vocalized by many guttural voices. His nostrils twitched at a sweet, almost sickly scent and he stared up at the hooded face which loomed into view, blocking out his sight of the glistening crystal.

Chris blinked and light was shining in his eyes again: a delicate spark from a metal sliver. A knife, he saw. Sharpened to a keen point. Raised above his chest. He giggled insanely at the prospect of its fall, thinking only of the light preparing to enter him, to warm and comfort his hollow body.

He closed his eyes and prepared for Paradise.

Chris remembered disapproving of the wheezing, groaning sound which interrupted the harmonious moment. He felt dismay as the beautiful singing devolved into a series of frightened yelps.

He woke from his worst dream yet and cried out as white light stabbed into his tender retinas.

Chris sipped at hot coffee. He was sitting in bed, propped up by pillows and fighting drowsiness. The Doctor was leaning earnestly across him, seated by the bedside, telling him everything, though only a fraction of it penetrated his mind.

‘I am not the man who plotted to destroy Detrios.’ That seemed quite simple. Silly of him to think it, really. ‘As I said before, that was my evil double.’ Science-fiction cliché or what!

But, somehow, that suited the Doctor. ‘You’ve been an unwitting accomplice of his since he first recruited you.’ Oops .

. . bit of cognitive dissonance there. He'd never even met the 124

real Doctor? 'I assumed you were complicit with his schemes, which is why I tried to trick you by pretending to be him.' No, that sailed straight over his head. 'I could see from your reaction that I was happily mistaken.'

Chris didn't remember the cup being taken from him, but the brown stain on the sheets told him why it had been. 'You're still suffering an adverse reaction to some type of sleeping drug,' the Doctor said (no, 'Dr Who' he had introduced himself). 'I suggest you stay here and sleep it off. My friend and I have an important mission.'

Dr Who stood up, but Chris reached for him. He gripped his wrist with more strength than he thought he possessed.

'Kat'lanna,' he croaked. The alien looked confused, so he added: Detrios.'

'Ah. I see. Well, maybe later. Right now, we have the Doctor's most evil and dangerous sidekick to collect.'

'No!'

Dr Who looked down on him pityingly. 'This is more important, Chris. Whilst any of the Doctor's friends remain at liberty, I feel sure they will press ahead with his plan to completely obliterate Detrios.'

That made sense, sort of. Chris let go, reluctantly. He felt oblivion rushing to claim him.

'That's good,' said Dr Who. 'You do understand. And you are on my side now, aren't you?'

'Your side,' Chris muttered as he sank back into darkness.

He surfaced a second later to hear an unfamiliar young voice, enquiring in concern about his newest friend's health.

'He'll be all right, Jason,' Dr Who said confidently. 'He's seen the light now.'

125

14

The Bitch Is Back

20 January 1994. 7.59 a.m.

The older man had his arm around the woman's neck. Her feet kicked out and found his shin. He dropped her and she twisted, knocking him aside. She seemed more interested in the guy behind him, the one with the blond hair and short pants.

She leapt for him.

And froze in mid-air.

8.55 p.m.

The picture raced backwards until the figures disappeared.

Will Beecham manipulated the controls and found their point of arrival. He paused the tape again. One frame, the café was empty — the next, it became a battleground. The image wavered, blurred by arrested motion.

He wondered if anyone had tampered with the film. He dismissed the notion immediately. What would be the point?

He watched the sequence again, in soundless monochrome, allowing it to run on. The time signature, a digital image in the screen's bottom left corner, notched up another minute.

8.00 a.m.

The woman and her target crashed into tables and scattered chairs. The other — the older, shorter man with black hair and a question mark-patterned jersey — was on her, but she shrugged him of and drove her fist into his companion's stomach. He doubled up in pain, and then both men were gone, as suddenly as they had arrived.

9.05 p.m.

Beecham blinked and the woman was gone too. The time 126

signature still read 0800. The whole event had taken place in under a minute.

There had only been two people in the building: Ian and Lisa, in the kitchens. Two witnesses to the extraordinary incident. Even they had not seen much. 'The woman shouted two words as she arrived,' they

had reported. ‘They sounded like “come from”.’

Nobody could work out what that might mean.

Beecham used the jog shuttle to spin the tape back and forth.

He was trying to read the lips of the intruders. He needed all this to make some sense. He wasn’t in luck.

He gave up on that segment. There was more to view. He was watching it all for the third time now.

He wound the tape on and pressed ‘play’. The screen lit up again with its rigid perspective of the café’s dining area. It took a moment’s twiddling for Beecham to locate the second occurrence.

His staff came into view on the monitor. They were tidying up, shuffling furniture to hide the fact that broken chairs had been removed. They would have to open up late today.

As if she was nothing but a conventional visitor, the woman arrived at 0914. She walked in through the street door this time.

9.14 a.m.

Dorothy McShane had decided to pay a visit to the café in Glebe; her first one since the Doctor had left.

She caught her reflection in the door glass above the CLOSED sign, dark hair tied back and trenchcoat drawn about her to hide the organic thing straddling her shoulders. The hopper’s breathing rippled the fabric of her fake backpack, but she hoped nobody would notice. The rebuilding in Paris, 1873, was going well and Dorothy had remembered her other responsibilities. A few jaunts to acquaint herself with the new hopper, a quick trip to run a message for Benny, then she had come here. To the café; its existence a side-effect of a hole punched through space-time by a woman called Kadiatu in a rogue time vessel. That rift was her responsibility. Her job was to make sure that nothing nasty bred in its cracks. This seemed a good place to start.

‘What happened?’ she asked, barging through the door.

Should she have checked earlier?

‘Sorry, madam, but we’re closed for the moment.’ The duty manager; tall, bronzed, wavy sandy hair.

‘Never mind that, what happened?’

‘We don’t know,’ admitted one of the waiters, righting a table. Someone else was brushing wood splinters onto a shovel.

‘We found it like this. You were here last time, weren’t you?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘All the weirdness, six months ago. You must think we never have a quiet day.’

If you’d like to come back in ten minutes?’

Six months ago? Time travel! Ace thought. Who needs it?

Still, she could worry about that one when it came up. For now, she needed to find out what had gone on this morning. Kids, she hoped.

She was halfway through the door, intending to wait within sight of the window — just in case — when she heard it. That familiar noise, like a key scraped along a piano string only much slower.

To Ace’s considerable surprise, the TARDIS arrived.

9.16 a.m.

Jason looked disdainfully at the woman on the screen, standing unruffled as cleaners fled for cover about her. ‘She looks the worst of the lot,’ he commented. ‘I admit, I was a bit unsure about our mission, with that nice-looking Melanie and Chris in there. But this one obviously blows up worlds in her spare time.’

Dr Who’s hand hovered over the door control. ‘And are you ready to stop her?’

He nodded, reaching beneath the console for a large stick and weighing it in one hand. ‘Ambush prepared. Go lure her in.’ Dr Who went outside and Jason slipped behind the door, following his progress via the scanner.

He grinned as Ace stepped forward to greet her visitor, unsuspecting. ‘I need you,’ Dr Who said. ‘Get into the TARDIS, I’ll give you details en route.’ Ace nodded and moved 128

to obey. Jason tensed and shifted his grip on his weapon.

Then, to his horror, the woman whipped around and punched his faithful friend in the bread-basket. She grabbed Dr Who's shoulder and applied a nerve pinch, which fortunately didn't work. The beleaguered alien struck bravely back and the pair became locked in close combat.

Jason dropped his stick (a bad move, he realized immediately) and rushed out to join the fray. He hurled himself onto Ace and pummelled her, but she threw him. He lashed out blindly, but she twisted and he ended up punching Dr Who instead.

Likewise, his friend's attack went awry and the good guys fell, entangled. Now Ace was above them, gun drawn. 'Right,' she said with ice in her voice, 'I spent enough time with the Doctor to know that you're not him. Who are you?'

'We're heroes,' Dr Who proclaimed loftily. 'We have come to arrest you, you evil miscreant.'

She laughed, incredibly. 'You what?' But she had made a mistake: her attention was entirely on Dr Who. Feigning queasiness and half-turning, Jason reached into his blazer and produced . . . hmm, what could it be? Ah . . . a sonic-powered weapon-destruction device.

Ace whirled, too fast, as Jason primed the machine. She fired

. . . but the blast was deflected by a circular, red- and white-striped shield which appeared on his arm. Simultaneously, Jason activated the sonic device and Ace's precious gun evaporated.

Dr Who went for her in that instant and brought her down.

'Surrender! I would hate to take your life, it's against all I believe in.'

'Believe in this!' Ace snarled. She knocked him back with the heel of her hand and laid into him, punching again and again until he reeled into the counter.

'Leave him alone!' screamed Jason. This time, his pocket held a rifle. Dr Who was down, unconscious and bloodied, and Ace turned her attention to him.

Now come on,' she said, reaching for the gun, 'you're only a kid, you don't want to go down for murder, do you?'

‘I am not!’ he protested. ‘I’m a grown-up. I’m . . .’ He faltered as he tried to remember the year. ‘Well, I was sixteen now. But I’m from the future, so I’m even older. So there!’ He stuck his tongue out.

Somebody grabbed him from behind. Jason squeaked and fired, but the rifle jerked upwards and he brought a shower of plaster down upon himself. He fell back and Ace leapt, pushing the courageous waitress aside. ‘I’ll handle this.’ She had won, Jason realized, in panic. She was going to torture and mutilate and kill him . . .

That was when the wildly improbable happened.

The room exploded and Ace staggered back, coughing and spluttering in thick smoke which didn’t bother Jason one bit. He knew, deep down, that the flames were the doing of his own subconscious, as had been the shield. They wouldn’t harm him.

It was sad that the girl must die, but then that’s what you got for shooting at goodies.

The despicable Ace yelped painfully as burning air coalesced into a fierce, red sphere, centred upon her. Two seconds later, she was gone and the café was back to normal, unscathed by the brief inferno. The staff had evacuated, but Dr Who was up and well and moving across to Jason’s side.

‘Is she dead?’ he asked. ‘Did I disintegrate her?’

He shook his head. ‘She transferred through time.’

‘Without a TARDIS?’

‘She had something on her back.

‘So what do we do?’

Dr Who produced two hand-held plastic devices. ‘With these portable time-transference machines,’ he said, ‘we can lock onto Ace’s fourth-dimensional trace. According to my read-out, she’s travelled forward to just past five to three this afternoon.

We can follow and pounce when she least expects it.’

9.21 a.m.

Barely half a minute after the last of the intruders had faded, the woman appeared again, in midair over a table. She hit the ground running, dived over the counter and left the camera's view.

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When her pursuers arrived a moment later, they stood, presumably confused by her absence. Then she leapt out, caught them unawares and landed on the younger man's back. She knocked him over, turned and smashed the plastic contraption from his companion's hands with a roundhouse kick. It fell and shattered, the pieces skittering beneath a table.

The woman disappeared. The boy followed immediately afterwards.

The remaining man was left alone. He knelt down and reached for his fallen contraption. He saw that it was broken.

He straightened, shrugged and vanished anyway.

9.08 p.m.

Beecham had watched that section of the tape straight through, and was not much closer to understanding it. This was almost as strange as the 'incident' six months ago; the one which had persuaded Beecham, with the approval of old man Yeadon, the owner, to install monitoring equipment in the café.

He had hoped, somehow, that it might help next time.

The building had been kept closed throughout the day. The authorities had been called in, but had been unable to shed much light, not even on the blue police box which remained in the corner, and which nobody could penetrate.

Beecham wound the tape to the next occurrence and remembered the theory he had formulated earlier. The one he had dismissed as being inherently ridiculous.

Time travel. That would make some sort of sense of it.

He stopped the tape at time signature 14 56, remembering the details of what he would see there. Beecham shivered as he realized how neatly this next incident, viewed out of sequence, might fit into the short gap between the last two.

2.56 p.m.

Ace felt like she had been pushed through a brick wall sideways: the increasingly familiar sensation of transference using the hopper. Her surroundings hadn't changed, although the flames, her attackers and the café's staff had gone. A second elapsed before she thought to check the clock on the wall 131

amongst the antique postcards.

The hopper was obviously getting to like her. It had pushed her five and a half hours forward without being given any such command. It had saved her life. And the imposter had chosen not to hang around waiting.

Except that, Ace noticed, the TARDIS was still here.

She was heading cautiously towards the craft when a slight noise made her turn, alertly. The weirdoes were behind her (where had they come from?) and she ducked, avoiding a crackling blast of energy which came from . . . from the young man's fingertips?

'Steady on Jason,' the Doctor-double warned. 'I'll go in first.'

He ran at her, but Ace pushed a chair into his path. He stumbled and she picked the chair up, using it as a shield.

She had no chance against people who could apparently do whatever they liked (or was it that boy Jason who had all the power?). She had to escape. But was that possible, if they could follow through time?

She needed an advantage. She hurled the chair at the boy and made for the counter, leaping across a table and sending the hopper a mental command more forceful than was necessary.

Five and a half hours back, to where she'd come from.

Ace transferred in mid-vault.

3.20 p.m.

Jason was still bent over, stomach aching. He reached for a chair, but before he could make contact, his foe returned. This time, she had travelled through time after him.

He heard and felt her knuckles crack against his teeth. He saw red filling his vision and felt his back impacting against the wall.

‘Get off him!’ a voice cried, dulled by the bloodrush in Jason’s ears. It was Chris, racing from the TARDIS and running, in slow-motion it seemed, to his fellow’s defence. He dimly registered Dr Who’s presence too, and felt relief as he sank to the floor and Ace, outnumbered, chose discretion and blinked out of this period.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Chris, rolling Jason over and 132

inspecting his face (which stung and felt puffed-up). ‘Who was that terrible woman?’

‘I’m sick of this story,’ complained Jason through tears. It’s not ending right.’

Dr Who’s strong hands helped him to his feet, Chris standing by to lend support. In the back of his mind, Jason felt some measure of triumph: the Doctor’s ex-supporter now at least knew that beating up a defenceless boy was wrong.

‘Where did she go?’ Chris was asking. ‘We have to get after her.’

‘No,’ said Jason, as defiantly as he could manage to sound.

‘Let her go. I don’t ever want reminding that we came to this horrid place!’

9.17 p.m.

This time, the dematerialization of the police box at time signature 15 22 did not concern Will Beecham unduly. ‘They left her,’ he said to himself. ‘Those two men came here after the woman, she got the upper hand on them and they gave up and went.’

He took a paper and pencil and began jotting down a few notes, feeling a sense of unease — and yet, of fascination — as the incredible fragments began to fit together.

There was more. He watched, with growing interest, gnawing at the pencil end as his impossible theory continued to gain in credence.

3.26 p.m.

She appeared again, running for where the box had been. She stopped short, apparently seeing that it was there no longer.

The young man materialized behind her then. She turned, side-stepped and pelted towards the door. But her other pursuer appeared,

belatedly, and she pulled back, looking more than mildly surprised.

The older man swung a fist. She twisted, changed course again and transferred. Her pursuers vanished, right on her heels.

9.18 p.m.

Beecham left the tape running. He knew that, only fifteen 133

seconds later, the strange woman would be back; for what he now suspected to be the coda to this day's events.

3.44 p.m.

Ace had only moved five minutes forward. She had proceeded to wait for almost twenty, alone in the wreckage of the café. It was becoming obvious that her attackers weren't following.

She didn't know how to feel about that. She had been gaining the advantage after all, but the young man's powers were phenomenal and one slip might have proved fatal.

The TARDIS was no longer there, of course. She thought about going back in time and trying to steal it, but she knew that the Doctor would have disapproved. 'Aaron Blinovitch would have a fit if he knew you were even thinking about it.' She smiled at the memory of his voice and felt a reassuring squeeze from the hopper; glad, presumably, that she was alive.

That gave her an idea.

If that kid was sixteen in 1994, and now he's . . . what? she thought. Twenty-two to twenty-six, maybe? So when did he come from? She did the calculations and grimaced.

So far as Ace knew, the hopper couldn't take her past the twentieth century.

But then, if it was forming an attachment to her . . .

9.43 p.m.

Will Beecham had stayed in the empty back room and watched it all again, right up to the woman's disappearance at 15 45. He still couldn't fit it all together — her original arrival, for a start, was problematic. But he had seen enough to be convinced.

He walked through into the dining area, hardly daring to think about what he might find there.

The broken machine. The one which she had kicked out of the older man's hands. Beecham still didn't know how he had moved through time without it, but that, for now, was little more than an irrelevance.

He scrambled in the dust and collected the plastic fragments 134

together. It might not, just might not, be beyond repair.

He stood up and laid the pieces out on a table. His ex citement grew as they seemed to combine.

Then, with an alarming explosion of sound, the three figures appeared, and the woman was running towards him — and into him. She recoiled and shouted and pushed him away, turning too late to prevent the older man from getting a grip on her neck.

They vanished abruptly, her final curtailed exclamation hanging heavy in Will Beecham's ears.

'Where the hell did you —?'

When he looked for the time machine again, it had gone.

135

15

Dr Who in an Exciting Adventure with...

Three cloaked figures walked sedately along Street 524: a gloomy, disused thoroughfare on the periphery of the settled area of Detrios's underground. Their heads were bowed, their faces hidden by Hessian folds. The dim, orange phosphorescence of the tunnel walls cast twisted, elongated shadows. Soft mumblings rose as the cultists prayed to the might of Enros. The faint odour of incense was barely discernible.

As they reached the rusted ladder to the surface, Kat'lanna pulled back her hood and emitted a long-contained whoop of joy. 'You know, I really didn't think this'd work!'

Chris stared at the TARDIS's scanner screen long after its shutters had closed. It was only when he became aware of Dr Who's intense eyes on the back of his head that he turned and forced himself to smile at

the strange man. ‘Very . . .

interesting,’ he said.

‘Yes, we do have some rather spectacular adventures, do Jason and I. What did you think of my daring rescue of the Budgerigar Princess?’

Chris nodded. ‘Very heroic. And I’m glad the Trods didn’t manage to steal the Orb of the Vampire Birds. But . . .’

Dr Who’s expression darkened as Chris faltered. ‘Yes?’ he prompted, with an undertone of menace.

‘Well, the planet Arcalis. You destroyed it.’

‘The Trods destroyed it!’

‘I mean you didn’t prevent it.’

‘I never said I was perfect,’ Dr Who responded indignantly. ‘I shan’t show you any more of my past adventures if this is your reaction.’

‘But you introduced that story as a great victory,’ Chris protested. ‘And yes, you stopped the Trods from taking over, but you also failed to prevent the destruction of a planet full of .

. . of Budgerigar People.’ He didn’t believe he was saying this.

‘It hardly matters. We made up the budgerigars anyway. We made up everything except the singing plants.’ Dr Who turned his back in disgust and strode out.

Left alone in the humming room, Chris frowned and asked himself: ‘What singing plants?’

The taller, more sturdy of Kat’s rescuers mounted the ladder grimly. ‘We’ll have been missed. This operation has blown our cover but good!’ He clambered upwards and heaved his shoulders against the hatchway. The Miracle’s sparkling, blue-green light fell down upon them. It made Kat shiver.

The other man squeezed her arm reassuringly. ‘Don’t mind Rokk. It was him who insisted we get you out. And we do still have some infiltrators left in the cult.’

‘Thanks, Myrg. Where are we going?’

Myrg nodded upwards. ‘We got a message. Some of the rebels have regrouped up there.’ He shrugged off his disguise and hauled his wiry form up onto the ladder. Kat followed.

They emerged into the city — the one she had thought of as her own. It was good to smell its sweet air again and to feel its dust shifting under her feet. But Kat felt uncomfortable in a temperature which had never before bothered her: the cold against which the Miracle did little.

Rokk was squatting on his haunches, scanning the horizon alertly. ‘We’re vulnerable up here,’ he stated. Kat didn’t feel it.

She felt emboldened by the familiar surroundings and also by Rokk’s presence. He had always been one of Mort’s more physically capable followers — and vociferous too, often bordering on the outright stubborn and quick-tempered. There were few people she would rather have beside her in a fight.

‘There’s no danger,’ she asserted. ‘Nobody comes out here.

Even the builders have hardly moved away from the Citadel area.’

‘And there’s more work than ever to do there now,’ Myrg 137

added supportively, a hint of satisfaction in his voice at the recent fate of the Superior’s would-be seat of power.

‘I still don’t like it,’ their self-elected leader rumbled. ‘We’d better keep moving.’

Kat looked back at the hatchway, suddenly reluctant to leave it. ‘Hang on! The cultists still have a friend of mine down there.’

‘We can’t go back!’

‘But he’s special! He’s an alien. He’d be useful to us.’ To us?

she wondered. Or just to me?

‘Oh, him!’ Rokk grunted. ‘He’s gone. We couldn’t save him.’

He sprinted across and into the cover of a dilapidated building.

‘He’s not dead,’ Myrg assured Kat, seeing her horrified reaction. ‘He

was going to be sacrificed. Like Rokk said, there was nothing we could do. Then this . . .' He faltered and Kat could see he was grasping for words. 'There was this trumpeting sound and a blue box appeared from nowhere. Two pink-skinned men ran out and . . . grabbed him! That was when we came for you, whilst Enros's people were distracted. I know, it sounds unbelievable.'

'No, no!' Kat was elated. 'That means that Christopher's safe.

His friends have rescued him. And they'll be back to help us.'

Chris caught up with Dr Who in the corridor. He wanted answers.

'Look,' his pilot said impatiently, not breaking his stride, 'it's simple: first, we land somewhere and discover an injustice.'

'Okay.'

'We confront the rulers to see if they'll change their ways.

They never do, of course, but it's polite to ask.'

Of course.'

'So we foment rebellion.'

'How?'

'We talk to the underprivileged: those who have been disenfranchized or perhaps imprisoned because of their opposition to the planet's dictator. Often, there's some sort of rebel group already in existence, so all we have to do is help it.'

'Then what?' Chris asked, more earnestly. Childish as Dr 138

Who's rants seemed, he couldn't help but think about Detrios and wonder if this strange man might provide the solution to that world's difficulties.

'Then we topple the administration, enabling the rebel leader to take charge.'

'What happens if the rebel leader mistreats the people too?'

'Then,' said Dr Who, 'we go back a few years later and do the same thing again.'

‘Oh.’

‘You still don’t understand, do you?’

Chris had to admit that he didn’t understand. He didn’t understand anything. He returned to his room (at least that offered him some familiarity) and lay on the bed as his confused mind worked over the events of the day.

It wouldn’t sink in. The Doctor whom he had known and trusted for a few months now was actually a cunning, malicious copy of the real thing, this ‘Dr Who’. That didn’t ring true.

After all, the Doctor had tried to do real good on Earth, and had succeeded to some extent. He had faced down the decidedly unpleasant Zamps too and . . . well, despite his occasional secrecy, he had always seemed the most honest and kind person that Chris had ever met.

But then, there was the matter of Detrios and the Doctor’s attempted destruction thereof. It wasn’t just that Dr Who had made that claim — Chris had worked the whole thing out already and knew it to be almost certainly true. And then there was the gun-toting woman who had laid into Jason at that restaurant place. He was still a little hazy about that, but if it really had been Ace — of whom he had heard the Doctor speak often — then that was one more point in the newcomer’s favour.

What Chris needed right now, he decided, was a healthy dose of Roz Forrester’s brand of common sense and stoic realism.

What he really didn’t need was a visitor.

‘I thought I’d better introduce myself properly, now that we’re both Dr Who’s companions. I’m Jason.’

‘I know. Chris Cwej.’ They shook hands. Chris’s eyes 139

narrowed. ‘You look a lot better.’

‘Dr Who has a healing machine in the TARDIS.’

That reminded Chris of something which had been nagging at him. ‘Dr Who’s TARDIS, you say?’

Jason forestalled the inevitable question. ‘The evil Doctor stole it. Dr

Who only managed to get it back recently, when he tracked down his mortal enemy and confronted him in one final, bloodcurdling . . . erm, confrontation.' He made a series of vocal explosion noises as his hands chased and smacked into each other in a pitiful reconstruction of the battle he was describing. Chris stared and revised his approximation of Jason's age downwards.

'Where is the Doctor now?'

'Oh, Dr Who took him to Galactic Prison.'

'Where's that?'

'But he tried to escape and got killed.'

'He what?'

Jason nodded as if it was all but trivia. 'A couple of his women, too. Bernice and . . . oh, what was her name?'

Chris could feel butterflies in his stomach. He clutched Jason's sleeve. 'Roz?'

'What?'

'Roslyn Forrester? Was it her?'

'Don't think so.' Jason's face cleared. 'Oh, I remember.

Forrester. She was the one we couldn't find.' He shrugged. 'I don't know what happened to her.'

'We've got to find her!'

'I know. Before she does any more harm.'

'No. She's my partner. She was . . . taken in by the Doctor like I was.' The words didn't sound right.

'Ah well,' Jason said. 'You've reformed now, that's the main thing.' Chris opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again.

Jason turned to leave. 'I'll see you later. I'm sure we're going to have lots of fun adventures together.'

'I'm sure,' said Chris half-heartedly.

It took five minutes after Jason's departure for the impact of the Doctor's and Benny's deaths to hit him. He wanted to cry, 140

but he couldn't. He felt too numb; detached.

Chris wished again that Roz was here. Or, failing that, Kat'lanna. He needed someone to talk to.

Kat was a little put out when she saw that her colleagues had gathered in her secret hideaway, the hut. The feeling didn't last, though. The location seemed fitting — and certainly safer than her last idea. She wondered why she hadn't thought of it herself.

She was even happier when she saw who was responsible for bringing the rebels together here. She pushed her way through the crowded room and flung her arms around Thruskarr's neck.

The lizard man's uniform was still a mess, but physically he seemed to have recovered from the attack. It was several seconds before she remembered Christopher and felt a pang of guilt.

There were thirty-plus people — humans and lizards —

packed into the building. Thruskarr and Rokk had taken the lead and Kat was glad to contribute without the additional burden of such responsibility.

'Enros's image has been badly shaken,' Rokk announced, using Kat's mattress to gain height. Even standing on bare floorboards, Thruskarr towered over him. 'Just a segment ago, a pink-skinned alien fell into his clutches.' A gasp rose from those who hadn't been aware of this.

'As you know,' explained Thruskarr, 'Enros has long claimed that he is worshipped on all other worlds. The alien could have provided proof that this was a lie.'

Rokk took up the story again. 'The only way he could save face was to denounce the alien as a servant of Evil. He tried to sacrifice him, but the alien's friends spirited him from right under our neighbourhood deity's nose. It must have shaken a few of the faithful!'

'Which makes this the best time to attack!' announced Thruskarr with gusto.

'More than that,' Rokk said, laying a steadying hand on the lizard's arm. His eyes gleamed. 'Myrg and I have spent some days undercover

amongst the cultists. We know that Enros is 141

planning to take over!'

That was met with even more astonishment than the announcement of Christopher's existence. Even Kat had not known about this development. 'But he practically controls the planet already,' she said.

'And now,' said Rokk, 'he wants it all! He's got enough followers. They're about to sweep him into power!'

'Who cares?' someone spoke up. 'He can't make things worse. Let 'em kill the rulers!'

Rokk seized upon his words. 'That's just the point. We let the cultists and the Ruling Family start their war, then we move in and finish it.'

'What can we do?' asked Myrg.

'We invade the church. Enros won't be out fighting, he'll be cowering in the safest possible place. But he won't be as well protected as usual, he'll only have a skeleton guard. With a concentrated, well-planned attack, we can kill him!'

A murmur of uncertainty ran through the rebels. Rokk was annoyed; Kat guessed he had been anticipating a supportive cheer. 'What's wrong with you all?'

'What . .' a young man asked, timorously. 'What if he's telling the truth? What if we die when we kill him?'

For a moment, Rokk didn't know how to respond. He looked from one upturned face to another and Kat did likewise, seeing nervousness and anguish, and outright fear in some of their expressions.

'You can't believe that,' said Thruskarr. 'You can't!'

'We've lost enough men to these fanatics already!' said Rokk bitterly. 'Between the Miracle and the lizard massacre, too many weak-willed people have gone over to Enros.'

'But what,' came the dissenting voice again, 'if they are right?'

This time, the mumblings of discontent were louder.

'I've been looking for you!'

The cat abandoned its contemplation of its paws and tensed. It stared distrustfully at the intruder in its garden.

‘Why didn’t you come out and fight Ace with us? I thought 142

you wanted to join our adventure!’

The cat blinked. Jason glowered. ‘You never come and play, no matter how you keep on promising. You’ve just been lying to me and I’m beginning to think we’re not real chums any more!’

The cat yawned, stretched, then jumped of its shelf and padded along the paved path by the pondside.

Intellectually, Jason knew that his powers did not extend to the control of living organisms: giving the cat a costume and imagining that it spoke to him did not guarantee the creature’s obedience. Emotionally, he brimmed with anger that this horrid beast was conspiring to ruin his story.

He leapt for the creature, which evaded his clumsy lunge and shot to safety beneath a bush on the garden’s far side. He crouched and snarled at it, enraged by its steadfast green eyes, shining contemptuously through protective thorns. ‘You’re not the real Power Puss at all, are you? The Doctor has turned you into mincemeat, replacing you secretly with one of his minions.

Well, you’ve been found out. You’re a spy, an evil traitor in my midst, and you must be punished!’

He dived for the bush, prepared to risk a few scratches in the laudable cause of destroying the enemy. The cat bolted, but collided with a plaster gnome which hadn’t existed but a second earlier. It rolled and landed back on its feet with a disgruntled hiss, then screeched out loud as Jason gripped its collar and hauled it upwards. ‘Gotcha!’

The cat dealt Jason a vicious scratch across the neck and he dropped it, howling in pain. It went for the door, but Jason was in no mood for pretend continuity now. So what if he used his powers overtly anyway?

A force-field blocked the doorway and giant hands hemmed the feline animal in until there was nowhere it could go. It was lifted and propelled towards Jason, who shielded his face with one hand and lashed out with the other. He punched the cat three times until it managed to scrape a sharp claw across his knuckles. He yelled again

and waved an arm to send his foe across the garden with a visible surge of kinetic energy. It 143

landed in the pond and thrashed to stay afloat.

Clutching his neck, Jason staggered through the dissipating barrier and into the roundel-decorated corridor.

In his wake, Wolsey climbed, spitting and spluttering, from the hated water and made a token attempt to shake himself dry before collapsing, battered and exhausted.

Blood soaked into the concrete.

Dr Who stood in the doorway of Chris's room. 'I've had an idea. We'll take a trip somewhere and you can see how I operate.'

'I'd rather go back to Detrios,' said Chris, staring at the ceiling. Even as he spoke the words, he wasn't sure. A cold knot formed in his stomach at the thought of what he might find on that planet: Kat's corpse, for a start. She couldn't have survived. Was he better not knowing?

'But we've been there twice,' said Dr Who, 'I'm bored with it. Besides, I thought you wanted to find your friend.'

Chris sat up alertly. 'You know where Roz is?'

He shook his head. 'But I'm assuming she discovered the Doctor's evil and he dealt with her somehow. If that is the case, she could well be dead.'

'She can't be. She's too strong!'

'Then there is one obvious place to look. Coincidentally, it's a planet I have wanted to clean up for some time, but which I was unable to help whilst the Doctor lived.'

Chris flinched at that reminder of his ex-companion's alleged fate. No matter what the Doctor had done, he couldn't — no, wouldn't — believe it.

'Where is this planet?' he asked, to divert his mind.

'You saw it briefly before,' said Dr Who. 'It's a world where hatred rules. Different races despise each other, corruption is rife and the rulers care nothing for their subjects, only for the accumulation of

wealth.'

'It sounds like Detrios,' commented Chris.

'And what did you do on that planet?' asked Dr Who searchingly.

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Chris thought about that and remembered their earlier conversation. 'I suppose I did what you said before. The rulers were in the wrong so I joined a rebel group who wanted to bring the system down.'

His visitor was beaming. 'That's excellent!' He stepped out into the corridor and reached to close the door behind him.

'Then I'm sure you will agree,' he said as he left, 'that a similar course of action will be appropriate on the planet Earth.'

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16

Return of the Evil Doctor

For a long time, there was only the dark.

Chris had tried to catch an hour's sleep, but had found that unusually difficult. Kat'lanna's face had swum through his dreams, the worry of Roz's disappearance had nagged him and the Doctor's betrayal — and death? had churned his guts alongside the uncertainty of his current alliance.

He returned to the console room, defeated but determined to put a brave face on his tiredness and disorientation. 'I've found one of our old crew,' he announced brightly. His travelling partners whirled to face him. 'Our cat, I mean. Wolsey. He was in the gardens.'

'When?' asked Jason, too keenly.

'About an hour ago,' said Chris, puzzled by the intense interest. passed through on the way to my room. I don't know where he is now.'

'We're landing soon,' said Jason. Chris thought the change of subject a little obvious, although he couldn't guess the reason.

'You'll soon see what Earth's like.'

That bothered him too. Did they know that Earth was his home planet? What were they going to do there?

They waited in silence until the ship landed, its rotor falling still with a *ping*. Dr Who operated the scanner and a pleasant green landscape was presented. A discarded crisp packet fluttered by, spoiling the image.

'London, England, Earth, 2001.'

'The time you picked me up from!' Jason exclaimed.

'The precise day. And I'm sure you'll agree, Jason, that this place and time, more than any other, reveals the full extent of 146

the Doctor's reprehensible villainy.'

'Absolutely.'

'I don't understand.' Chris was 953 years before his own birthdate. His mind raced to call up details of long-forgotten history lessons.

'This is a world in chaos.' Dr Who began to pace and make extravagant gestures in much the same manner as the Doctor when in full flow. 'Crime, pollution, starvation, war, the rich becoming richer off the backs of the ever more poverty-stricken underclass. Greed is king as people covet material wealth and power, regardless of the consequences to others and to their environment.'

Chris swallowed. It all sounded so much like the Earth of his own time: the one he had heard of in newscasts and refused to believe in until he had had to flee the vengeance of a conspiracy exposed. Those newscasts always claimed that things had been better in the past.

'But what's that got to do with the Doctor?'

'You may not realize this,' said Dr Who, 'but, according to the TARDIS, the Doctor visited this planet almost as often as all the other civilized worlds of the universe put together.'

'I . . . think he did express a preference.' Heck, he had picked up Chris here and brought him back since; he knew everything about the place. Dr Who was telling the truth!

'To my distorted reflection, this planet was an opportunity to work his mischief. The Doctor treated Earth like a grand, perverse experiment,

to indulge his cruelest whims as he traded in deprivation and misery. Now he's gone, we can tidy up!'

The dark became suffused with light. Red, blue and yellow; strong, primary colours. They merged and formed new, subtler tones. The thunder began and, less obtrusively but closer by, the bubbling of liquids. An ozone smell started life as an abstract notion before taking on actuality. Cold water dripped onto the Doctor's face like pin pricks and coaxed him away from solitude, into the new world. Reality was remade in a minute and a half.

* * *

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Ace emerged from the side street and into the blinding winter sunshine and cold, crisp air of Tottenham Court Road. She donned her shades and inspected her surroundings. Same old crowds, same London traffic (ah! — but wasn't that a T-reg Taxi? What year would that make it?), same old Centre Point: a concrete sentry over the busy junction. The air was heavier than she was used to, pollution refracting the shop lights and the early Christmas illuminations. Ace gave a wry smile, walking past the McDonalds branch she had briefly worked in a lifetime ago. Not many places survived her presence so long.

She crossed as soon as the traffic eased and jogged down Charing Cross Road (she considered the tube, but this was healthier and she'd been out of practice). She could have got closer, but materializing in public was something the Doctor would have frowned upon. She had chosen the nearest, most likely deserted spot she could remember from her fries-shovelling days. Even so, she had risked unravelling the space/time continuum or perhaps providing an old drunk with an anecdote no one would believe.

She paused at a news vendor's and read the date on the *Standard*: 30 November 2002. Three days cajoling the semi-sentient hopper, coaxing better-than-normal accomplishments from it, and still she couldn't get all the way to 2004. Mind you, this wasn't bad. She flashed it a brief thought of gratitude as she hurried on towards Leicester Square.

She had had no right to expect this century at all, really.

The Doctor inspected the laboratory, sniffing the boiling Contents of a glass beaker to learn that it contained only green-dyed water. The

room was a clutter of test tubes and jars and electrical equipment labelled ‘Amp Extractor’, ‘Light Year Timer’ and other improbabilities. A vat of murky liquid on the main bench professed to hold a ‘Naughty Brain’ and warned the user not to place it in home-built humanoid heads.

The Doctor’s curiosity was shared by Bernice, who wandered about and touched everything. Melanie perched on a stool and shook her head repeatedly as if hoping to wake up. Roslyn was nonplussed but attentive, waiting for an explanation.

‘I knew it,’ said Benny at length. ‘Hell is a mad scientist’s lab, and you’re in charge of it!’

‘This isn’t Hell,’ the Doctor assured her. It’s only a sequel.’

‘To what?’

‘To our encounter with Jason and his identity-usurping colleague.’

‘So where are we?’ Roz asked. She looked up as thunder crashed overhead. Rain sliced onto and through the cracked pavement lights and formed a puddle on the wooden floor. A jagged lightning fork cast her face into relief.

‘In what is obviously Jason’s idea of my headquarters.’

‘You mean he created this?’ said Mel.

‘Somehow, I don’t think he just found it here.’

‘We’re dealing with someone who possesses a real comic book mentality,’ Benny considered, frowning at a meter which purported to measure neutron flows in gigacurrents.

‘Don’t knock it,’ said the Doctor, ‘it’s that mentality which kept us alive when, by rights, we should have been blasted to ashes. Jason considers me the arch-enemy of Dr Who, so in true comic book style, he refused to let me die in space.

Subconsciously or otherwise, he saved us and brought us here.’

‘To where, exactly?’ asked Mel.

‘To a room, it seems, conspicuous by its lack of exits.’

‘No worries,’ Benny chipped in. ‘I’m sure our benefactor will have thought to give us a secret door.’

‘I’m sure,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘And, wherever and whenever we turn out to be, I think I can guarantee one more thing.’

‘Oh?’

‘We’re in a sequel. Another clash between Dr Who and his malevolent doppelgänger. That means the TARDIS is undoubtedly on its way.’

* * *

The TARDIS had materialized by the lake in St James’s Park, providing eight sober locals with an anecdote no one would believe. Its occupants headed onto the Mall, along which Dr Who strolled, hands behind his back, enjoying the faint breeze of the warm July morning. Jason kept pace, but Chris lagged 149

behind and watched his two allies carefully.

‘Why are we in England?’ asked Jason. ‘Surely America is a far more evil place? Or Russia?’

‘One step at a time, my boy,’ the older man said, with the air of a kindly tutor. ‘This world’s system of national boundaries is like none I’ve encountered elsewhere. The Doctor enjoyed pitting country against country and watching them fight for religion or territory or simply to profit from each other’s misfortunes. We have more than a world’s fair share of wicked rulers to depose before Earth can finally know peace. We may as well start with those whose misdeeds we are most familiar with.’

‘Where are we going?’

Dr Who produced an umbrella from nowhere. It was uncannily like the Doctor’s own, right down to the red question mark-shaped handle. He twirled it, pointed down the straight, tree-lined road and answered: ‘There!’

Chris strained to see past the imposing marble statue at the road’s end. He was getting the sick feeling that this was an important place, historically speaking.

The newspaper archives of Westminster Library had been computerized, but the available search categories didn’t suit Ace’s

admittedly rather esoteric requirements. She spent several long hours poring over headlines, most of which concerned the Golden Jubilee celebrations for Queen Elizabeth II. She was hot and wanted to take off the trenchcoat and backpack, but she knew how her fellow researchers might react to the hopper's appearance. The organism slept, its pulsating body warm on her shoulders.

The evening had drawn in by the time Ace stepped out onto St Martin's Street, well satisfied. She squinted to read her print-out: the salient details of the top ten weirdest reported events of the century thus far. She had given special weighting to mentions of time travel, proximity to London, all the usual things. It was her best shot. She would visit each of the ten events in order, beginning with the most recent. If she couldn't find the Doctor or his scumbag double mixed up in at least one 150

of them, she would eat her shades.

Ace took one last look at the London of late 2002, then muttered: 'Been here, done this!' and set about locating a secluded corner from which to vanish.

The Doctor and his three companions emerged into the underground station at Victoria Embankment. When they looked back, the steps they had climbed were no longer there, and Bernice swore that the siting of the laboratory was geographically impossible.

The Doctor physically deflated as they climbed yet more stairs to the surface. 'Earth,' he grumbled. 'I might have known.'

'What year is it?' asked Forrester.

'About the turn of the twenty-first century to judge by the level of pollutants in the atmosphere. We're in Jason's time.'

He hurried ahead, out into the light, and set a brisk pace along the river bank. Mel couldn't help but feel disappointed that the quality of Thames water had not improved since 1986. Or rather, she reminded herself, since 1999, when an earlier Doctor had brought her here.

Whilst Bernice and Forrester pointed out features of historical interest to each other, Mel moved to the Doctor's side. There were several things she wanted to say. She began with the easiest. 'I don't like the company you're keeping. Those two would shoot you without batting an eyelid!'

‘A little unfair,’ he said.

‘But you hate guns!’

‘Dirty tools for a dirty job.’

‘You never used to travel with people like that. What happened to that lovely young girl, what was her name? Ace?’

‘I want to ask you something, Mel: what would you do if you had infinite power?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘A simple enough question. Jason’s power is near infinite.

Imagine what it must have taken to create and control the character of Dr Who within my own TARDIS over an interstellar distance. Now he’s come back to Earth for a reason, 151

so what do you think it might be?’

Mel pondered that. ‘If it was me, I suppose I’d be tempted to sort everyone out. Stop unfair things happening, disarm weapons, share wealth more evenly. I wouldn’t, of course.

There’s no excuse for creating that kind of dictatorship, no matter how noble the motives.’

‘Do you think our friend appreciates that?’

‘Do you think his motives are noble?’

‘Naïve, perhaps, and immature. But Jason is basically no villain. Where would he start?’

‘By confronting the present rulers. At 10 Downing Street. Or the Houses of Parliament.’

‘Do they exist in this era?’ Bernice asked, attracted by the turn the conversation had taken.

‘Oh yes.’

Mel frowned. ‘In fact, we’re walking towards them.’ The Doctor nodded happily. ‘And have been ever since we left Embankment station! So what was the questioning in aid of?’

‘I knew you’d get there eventually.’

Dr Who gripped the railings of Buckingham Palace’s east gate and called to the yeomen of the guard, immobile and impassive in their positions. ‘You heard me, I wish to speak to the Queen!’

Chris hovered uneasily, a few feet away. A scattering of tourists remained from the changing of the guard and he felt the unwelcome attention of sensation-seeking eyes from around the Victoria Memorial. A policeman pushed across the plaza and Chris pointed this out to Jason. ‘Shouldn’t you tell him to stop?’

Jason shook his head.

‘If she won’t see me,’ Dr Who shouted, ‘I shall assume that she’s complicit with the injustices of this country’s governmental system. I will contact the underground movement, lead it against her and install a more suitable monarch in her place.’

The constable tapped his shoulder and the crowd closed in with gleeful anticipation. ‘Might I ask what you’re trying to do, sir?’ he enquired with strained politeness.

Dr Who greeted him enthusiastically. ‘Ah, officer, you might 152

be able to help me. I wish to give your Queen a dressing-down, sort her out on one or two small points. But those . . . those red-frocked puppets —’ He indicated the implacable guardsmen with an angry sweep of his arm. are conspiring to be wilfully obstructive!’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘Dumb insolence, that’s what it is.’

‘Perhaps,’ the policeman said, so polite now as to be positively sarcastic, ‘Her Majesty does not wish to entertain visitors?’

‘Then she should come out and tell me herself!’

The policeman shook his head wearily. ‘If you have something to say to the Queen, I suggest you write her a letter.

In the meantime, please keep the gates clear. These people don’t want an anti-royalist weirdo staring out of their souvenir photographs and I’d hate to clutter up police cells by arresting you for loitering.’ He pivoted and marched off, leaving Dr Who to stare, bewildered, after

him. Some tourists left. Most lingered to see if this demented man would do something else strange.

They weren't disappointed.

'What are you doing?' squeaked Jason, as Dr Who took hold of the railings again and hauled himself upwards.

'Getting myself arrested. It's the best way to contact rebel groups.' The gates were almost twenty feet high, but plenty of footholds allowed him to scale them in seconds. He clambered over the ornamental fleurs-de-lis, dropped to the far side and yelled: 'Hey, officer, come and look what I've done!' The policeman didn't hear him, or pretended not to. He turned into Buckingham Gate and Dr Who scowled after him. 'Blind imbecile!' He looked around as if seeing where he was for the first time. 'Still, now I'm here, I might be able to meet this Elizabeth woman after all. Perhaps she's unaware of her underlings' actions?'

'But there are beefeaters on the door,' protested Jason.

'So? They can't move, can they?'

'I think they might,' offered Chris, 'if you try waltzing in.'

Dr Who smiled, turned and sauntered towards the unguarded 153

visitors' entrance at the left-hand end of the Palace's stone frontage. A ripple of excitement spread through the crowd and Chris covered his eyes.

As Dr Who reached the door, it was yanked open. Four men emerged and halted, surprised at having run straight into the bizarrely dressed intruder. He doffed his hat and made to introduce himself.

Six more men hurtled around the building's corner. Those in the doorway recovered their wits and moved into action. Before he could speak, Dr Who was forcefully wrestled to the ground.

In the shadow of the Houses of Parliament, the Doctor looked towards Westminster Bridge and wistfully recalled a time when Evil was just that and destroying it entailed no moral complications. The Daleks would parade themselves across that landmark, two centuries hence, their message to the people of Earth: that London had fallen.

He shuddered at the notion that those might somehow have been the

'good times'. In a real sense, he had been responsible for the Dalek invasion himself. He had landed in its midst, after all, out of all Earth's possible futures at the time. How many deaths had he caused that way, as a casual by-product of his interference? How many tragedies that should never have happened? He recalled Gabriel and Tanith, embodiments of the lives snuffed out by such tragedies; of the people who would never exist in *his* universe.

This shouldn't have happened.

He should not have been here, bereft of his ship. But his plan had gone wrong, he had not foreseen Jason's intervention, and his companions were in peril as a consequence. Would he never learn?

The hands of Big Ben's clock moved on to the hour. The bell itself interrupted the Doctor's thoughts as it ushered in the afternoon. 'I hope you're sure about your theory,' said Benny.

'I'd hate to think we were standing here while Jason robs a Midland and Westminster Bank or something.'

'That doesn't exist yet,' the Doctor said distractedly. 'And I'm sure. My homing device tells me that the TARDIS is 154

nearby, in St James's Park. Jason is coming here, to contact those in power.'

He crossed his fingers and tried to shake the feeling that he'd missed something.

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17

Butterfly People.

Lawrence Murdock knew nothing of time travel, but he knew a little about cause and effect. He could have said less on the subject of air currents, but he did know about butterflies. One night in the pub, it had been explained to him: that the flapping of a butterfly's wings could cause hurricanes, although he didn't really understand how. And Murdock knew from the TV that hurricanes killed people, sometimes in great numbers.

So, one day in early 2002, after reports of a particular tragedy on the evening news, he knew exactly who to blame for the carnage.

Lawrence Murdock knew how to use a gun. But he wasn't too proficient at aiming one.

In the summer of the previous year, Mark Waring thought he had a better way of saving humanity. He stood in Trafalgar Square, shouting to the public in hope of their buying his newspaper and being thus converted. Most weren't open-minded enough to seek enlightenment, so when two blond men in their early twenties approached, Mark saw them as a chance to double his day's takings.

One of the men extended a hand and Mark took it warily. The fellow was wearing what seemed like a school uniform. His more normal friend hung back as though embarrassed. 'I'm Jason,' the schoolboy said. 'Why do you sell those?'

'Because I believe in what they say,' Mark answered, surprised that the question should have been put.

'Believe in what, exactly?'

'In the Marxist critique of contemporary society, of course. In the abolition of archaic class boundaries and the redistribution 156

of the means of production. The purpose of this paper is to open people's eyes to our hegemonic domination by the ruling elite and to hasten the day of revolution.'

'Fab!' Jason said, clapping his hands enthusiastically. 'A friend of mine is planning a revolution today. Want to come?'

Mark regarded him suspiciously. 'You running a poster campaign?'

'No,' said Jason, in the same puzzled tone which Mark had just used. 'We're raising a rebel army to take over the country.'

Mark stared.

'I thought you wanted that.'

Mark turned to the other man for some clue; perhaps a wry grin to show that his friend was normally considered insane.

But he was staring steadfastly up at Nelson's Column.

'Well? Isn't this what you're waiting for?'

Mark looked at his newspapers, the headline SMASH THE

STATE emblazoned across each of them. He turned back to Jason, unnerved by the fanatical light in his eyes.

'Don't be stupid!' he said. Then he walked off as fast as he could manage without running.

'You don't understand,' Jason called after him, voice catching. 'We're making history!'

Melanie Bush stood in her own future, outside the unchanged landmark of Buckingham Palace, and wondered how things could look so similar and yet feel so different. She was only peripherally aware that, to the two women beside her, the events of 2001 belonged to tales of distant ancestors.

The Doctor returned from his short but intense conversation with a tourist. 'You were right,' he told Benny, disgusted with himself, 'we were wasting our time. Jason came here.'

'Second rule of warfare,' said Benny. 'Don't overestimate your opponent either.'

'I should have learned that from the Vardans.'

'So what now?' asked Roz (itching to get into action, Mel thought contemptuously).

'I know something Jason doesn't. Benny, Roz, I want you to stay here. Keep an eye on the TARDIS, in case the barrier 157

falters, and guard the palace. He'll be back. Mel, you're with me. We need to be in Sheffield and I'm afraid the quickest route is by train.'

'Can't I go?' Benny asked. 'The north of England was really quaint at this time.' She dropped into an unconvincing hybrid Lancashire/ Yorkshire accent. 'By 'eck lass, tha's got a whippet in tha tripe bowl, bah gum.'

The Doctor frowned. 'What books have you been reading?'

Tina Matthews had been reading books about animal experimentation. That was why she wanted to change the world.

But she wasn't going to do it by listening to some jerk in short pants.

'Why not?' Jason pleaded, pursuing her along the road.

‘Because you’re nuts.’

‘We can be nice to animals if that’s what you want.’ Jason tugged her elbow so that she dropped the leaflets she had been distributing. ‘We can make you Princess with Responsibility for Wildlife, how does that sound?’

Tina swore as she knelt to gather the fallen papers. To her annoyance, he crouched beside her. ‘What does it say on these?

“Stop Animal Experimentation”? We can do that.’

Abandoning the remaining leaflets, Tina got up to leave.

‘Fine, then!’ Jason said petulantly. ‘Just don’t blame me if we

“accidentally” pass a law banning all makes of shampoo that haven’t been dripped into cats’ eyes!’

Tina whirled around and punched him on the nose. She was rather pleased to feel it snap.

‘Cruncher’ Simpson didn’t think of himself as someone who could alter history. Faces, yes but history, no. But he was looking at twenty years this time, so with nothing to lose, he might as well throw in with anyone who could make things difficult for the pigs. Just for a laugh.

‘Right lads,’ Dr Who said. ‘Now we’re out of that depressing prison, let’s make plans for our glorious take-over.’

‘Shouldn’t we get away from here first?’ asked someone. Dr Who gestured towards the doorway of Charing Cross police 158

station. It had been bricked up, Cruncher saw. Not that that surprised him; no more, anyhow, than had this strange man’s elaborate escape plan, which had involved sleeping draughts in the guards’ coffee and a collapsible battering ram which the desk sergeant had failed to notice in the incoming prisoner’s pocket. Ten minutes after Dr Who’s arrival, the nine occupants of the police cells were back on the loose. Some more so than others.

‘Chris! Key!’ Dr Who shouted, alarmed as two thugs bolted.

‘I haven’t told you what to do yet. Come back!’ He whirled as another erstwhile follower shrugged his shoulders and sloped off. ‘Not you as well, Giles. Get back here, Tony. Where’s Kyle? What happened to the

two Neils?'

The gathering dissipated, Dr Who turning one way and another as he tried to reverse the exodus. 'If you're interested,'

he shouted forlornly after his would-be fighting force, 'I'll be at the Victoria Memorial at three.'

Cruncher clapped a hand on his shoulder. It was meant to be supportive, but it almost drove the flustered little man through the pavement. 'I'll be there, Doc!'

Dr Who smiled weakly, hiding his upset. 'I know, Cruncher.

Thank you.' Then he disappeared like the fading picture of an old TV set.

Cruncher shrugged and, unperturbed, headed for the nearest pub. He whistled airily.

Murdock came at Ace from behind. She cursed — forgetting your training, she reprimanded herself — as a bullet cracked by. She flung herself aside, rolled back up with her gun primed and aimed the weapon at his head. He fired again and Ace, alerted by the mad glint in his eye, barely managed to avoid this second shot.

He doesn't care if I kill him or not!

For a second, she considered it. She would have done, without compunction, if he had posed a threat. He didn't. The only threat here was time: in about a minute, the main door of the abandoned warehouse would be shouldered open and a posse of trigger-happy cops would storm in. Two would die.

They would kill Murdock in turn. Or at least, that's what the 159

papers said.

Ace rushed him with a feral cry. As she had expected, Murdock panicked. He wasn't a soldier. She disarmed him with a kick and brought him down hard. It was over in seconds.

'The police can find a nice soft room for you, sonny. Only let's get rid of the shooter first, eh? We don't want any accidents.'

To her disgust, her captive was sobbing. 'I only wanted to punish the butterflies. We mustn't let them do it again.'

‘Do what?’ asked Ace as she emptied Murdock’s automatic and flung it to the furthest corner. She realized that she didn’t need an answer.

She remembered the news stories; the ones she had read nine months hence at Westminster Central Library. They had been pretty vague, but they had gone on about the timestream and the laws of cause and effect. That was what had attracted her to this place and time. The second on her list. The second event at which she had failed to find the Doctor.

Ace was familiar with the theory. A butterfly flaps its wings; air currents shift; a year later, the effect might build up into a hurricane on the far side of the world. So Murdock had armed himself and taken on the job of stopping it. He had tried to kill all the butterflies. He had managed to kill people instead.

The police had pursued him to the warehouse, where the forewarned Ace had been waiting to see if this unbalanced individual might have a connection with the man she was looking for. No such luck. But he had given her a few things to think about.

She had made a difference. The newspapers’ mad gunman had been taken down after three accidental slayings, not five.

His life had been spared. And although, to Ace, this was all her future, just a few days ago, at the library, it had been history.

She tried not to think about it. She concentrated on the details of the third event on her print-out. She was going back to the end of 2001 this time.

As the police burst into the building, Ace coaxed the hopper into performing its next vanishing trick. Her last sight was of 160

Murdock, rolled into a foetal ball. He wouldn’t even have had to destroy any butterflies, Ace thought. A minor diversion in the path of the right one might have eradicated the future she had just come from.

Yet here she was, heading further back into the past, where she could be responsible for so much worse.

Christopher Cwej was worrying about the implications of his own actions. All the time he had been on Earth, two voices had been screaming in his head: one said he was doing the right thing, that it was only what he had tried on Detrios; the other told him to stop

messing with his own past and get the hell out of here. He was currently trying to hold both in abeyance whilst biting into an undercooked hamburger from a roadside stall and trying to detect any taste of ham.

Jason raced up the steps from the subway toilets, shaking.

'What happened?' Chris asked. He noticed that Jason's attempt to clean his nose had been unbelievably successful: there was now no sign that it had been broken.

'I think I talked to one of the enemy.'

'You weren't trying to recruit down there?'

'He said he liked my costume,' said Jason, short of breath. He clutched Chris's arm and hurried him away, checking over his shoulder. 'I didn't know what he meant at first, but he guessed I was looking for some men.'

'Oh.'

'And when he mentioned sorting out an old queen, I thought he had to be on our side.'

Chris changed the subject. 'Where are we going?'

Jason looked at his watch. 'Back to the Palace. We have a rendezvous with Dr Who at three o'clock.'

That was news to Chris. 'When did you arrange that?'

'I just did, all right?' Jason strode on ahead and Chris sighed, feeling his grasp of the situation crumbling.

Bernice Summerfield watched a young family feeding ducks in St James's Park. 'It's so peaceful. You wouldn't think time was about to unravel.'

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Roslyn Forrester scowled and hurled another stick at the TARDIS doors. Like the earlier ones, it exploded in flames. 'I can't get my head around this,' she said. 'We're almost a millennium into my past — if things had gone wrong here, I'd know. It's like when we went to the Great War: why risk our necks when we know things turn out okay?'

Benny shrugged and half laughed. ‘Don’t ask me. For all we know, we might already be part of this history. If so, we’d change things by doing nothing.’

suppose.’

‘Or by stepping on the wrong blade of grass, shooting down the wrong person, kicking that Coke can over there . . .’

‘But what happens if we change things so that our times never exist?’

‘Don’t think I haven’t wondered,’ said Benny soberly. ‘What if, each time I’ve visited the past, my history has subtly changed? If I changed with it, I’d never notice!’ She shivered and wrested her thoughts from that image. ‘Frightening, if you think about it. That’s why I try not to. Come on, there’s no point hanging around here, let’s check Buck House again.’

As the two women left, Bernice kicked out deliberately at a mangled drinks can. It skipped and came to rest in the middle of the path. Four and a half hours later, the front Wheel of a young man’s bike hit the displaced object. He suffered slight bruising, which his mother stayed up late fussing over. The young man’s sister was conceived a month later than she might otherwise have been, and with different chromosomes. Her descendant never went on to join the Earth Peace Corps, so that a pivotal speech was drafted by someone altogether less eloquent. Earth was plunged into the Draconian war an hour early, and dozens more soldiers on both sides perished.

History shuddered and rewrote itself slightly. As paradoxes went, this one was minor and easily accommodated. Next time, the universe might not be so lucky.

Jason almost cried as he neared the Victoria Memorial and saw what the afternoon’s efforts had wrought: just two recruits, a stocky man built like a shed and a tall girl with blue hair who 162

chewed gum and inspected her own fingernails. He recognized the latter as Jessie, one of his own efforts. She had been selling bootleg tapes on the street, describing her activities as ‘a blow against the fixing of CD prices by collusive practices, innit?’

‘Cor!’ she exclaimed as Jason and Chris approached. ‘Is this the ‘ole rebel army then?’

‘Size isn’t important, Jessie,’ Dr Who said, fairly dwarfed between his

comrades-in-arms. He beckoned to Jason. ‘I’ve brought out the battletank.’

‘Oh, goody.’ Jason brightened as he was led around the monument. He enjoyed watching Chris’s eyes widen at the sight of the bulky metal dreadnought behind it, resplendent in canary yellow. A few onlookers had been attracted by the vehicle’s incongruity, and one boy was bold enough to have climbed up onto its caterpillar tracks.

‘That’s a weapon an’ ’alf and no mistake, guv’nor,’

commented Jessie.

‘I left it here so the Queen wouldn’t spot it if she looked out of her window,’ Dr Who said. ‘What do you think, Cruncher?’

Cruncher grinned and smacked a fist into one palm.

‘Hey Mister,’ shouted the teenager on the tracks, ‘is this your tank or what?’

‘It certainly is, young fellow.’

‘Are you making a film?’

‘No. I intend to smash my way into Buckingham Palace.’

‘Top! Can me and me mate hitch a ride?’

‘The more, the merrier.’

The youth pulled open the tank’s lid and ushered a similarly keen friend into its spacious interior. Jason watched on proudly, but he deflated as he turned and saw Chris’s disapproving expression.

‘I think this has gone far enough.’

‘What, getting cold feet?’ sneered Jason. ‘Becoming a cowardly custard?’

‘Look, I agree that this place isn’t perfect. But Queen Elizabeth II is a respected historical figure where I come from.

You can’t just barge in there and . . . and beat her up!’

‘She 11 only need beating up,’ said Jason, ‘if she won’t step down and let somebody fairer take over.’

‘Forget it!’ instructed Chris. ‘There are proper channels you can go through. There’s no point continuing this farce!’

‘Farce?’ Jason exploded.

Chris indicated his unlikely army. ‘You’ve spent three hours assembling this lot!’

Jason felt tears welling again. ‘If you’re going to be childish,’

he blustered, ‘then you can’t play. We’ll make do without you!

But you just be careful —’ He wagged a stern finger ‘— else you’ll end up becoming a villain and getting blown up like the Doctor!’ He turned his back on the traitor and strode towards the battletank, fists clenched to suppress his anger.

Dr Who was helping Jessie into the cockpit. She hesitated, pointing out the rows of decals which adorned the door. ‘What the flippin’ ’eck are those?’

Jason’s disappointment was forgotten in an instant. ‘They were my idea. I saw it on the telly once. It’s all the horrid dictators we’ve sorted out with the tank.’ He pointed to a sticker: a silhouette of a multi-tentacled beast. ‘That one was the Fifty-Legged Sweet Stealer of Mentraculus IV. This —’ He indicated a more regular, three-sided shape was the . . . erm, the . . . I know, the Evil Green Triangle of the planet Trigonometrus. And these are all Trods down here, we’re always battering them.’

‘This time,’ Dr Who observed, ‘we won’t have to bother getting one of those shapes cut out. We can stick a first class stamp on the door instead.’

Jason laughed heartily, but his good humour faded as his eyes met the resolute stare of Chris Cwej. There was no point getting steamed up, he told himself. After all, he still had six freedom fighters, including the kids. And there was only one Queen.

He’d have this country sorted out by tea-time.

Jason hauled himself into the cockpit. He failed to register that he’d stepped on a butterfly. It crumbled to powder.

18

Getting There

Almost two hours into the journey, the Doctor was still pacing the empty first class carriage at the back of the London to Sheffield express. Mel had woken from a troubled sleep and she rubbed her eyes and groaned as he sat down opposite her again and fidgeted. 'That won't get us there any faster you know,' she said.

He scowled. 'We might not get there in time at all. Over two decades and still this miserable corporation haven't realized my concept for a super-fast train! What have they been doing?'

'Your concept?'

The Doctor looked at Mel as though she was nothing but an unwanted distraction. 'I was going to pop back and suggest it,'

he said. 'I'll still have to, even though it didn't work. At least the timetable amendments I'll make were taken up.'

Mel's head spun. 'You are kidding me, aren't you? You're going to travel back in time to make arrangements so that we can be on this train now? I don't believe you!'

The Doctor looked at her sharply. It's not impossible,' he said. 'Just an intricate and risky operation. And not as successful as I'd wished.' He was up and pacing again. Mel watched him helplessly, unable to see the loveable rogue with whom she had once travelled.

This new Doctor was truly an alien. She didn't know him at all.

The battletank's engine sounded like a pneumatic drill. A small crowd was gathering, watching curiously as the lurid yellow object hove into view around the side of the Victoria Memorial.

Amongst them, Chris stood, his stomach churning with 165

indecision. What would the Doctor do now? Probably whip up some device to stop the thing in its tracks, he thought. Would that he could do likewise — right now, he didn't even have a gun.

The unwieldy war-weapon was turning, inexorably, to orient itself upon the Palace's main gates. Dr Who was really going to do this!

There was nothing Chris could do to stop him: even alerting the security forces would be a wasted effort. They would know soon enough, in any case.

Jessie leaned out of the cab window and gave an exhilarated cry of 'Yeee-haaaaa! The battletank surged ahead with unexpected speed, and Chris pushed his way towards its target, desperately hoping that a chance to help might somehow, miraculously arise.

'Then the nun,' Bernice was saying, 'whipped off her habit and said: "*Ta-daaa!* The bus driver!" '

The punchline was punctuated by an almighty crash and the tortured shriek of rending metal.

'It's happened,' said Roz. She broke into a run.

'You could at least have tittered,' muttered Benny as she followed.

The train had stopped and the Doctor was arguing with a uniformed conductor, displaying an intensity which made Mel shiver. 'I've told you, I can fix your mechanical failure in two minutes.' Mel shrunk back into her seat and desperately wanted not to be here. 'And don't tell me about your petty regulations.

Your bureaucratic officiousness could cause the destruction of the timelines, not to mention the death of Queen Elizabeth II!'

Mel covered her eyes as the victim of this tirade tried to calm her companion down, addressing him as if he was simple. A few seconds later, the Doctor fell back into his seat with an expression of fury. He spent the next five minutes cursing the inefficiencies of British public transport. Then, to Mel's alarm, he slumped forward across the table.

'Doctor she cried. 'Doctor, get up. You're scaring me, Doctor.'

He sat up slowly, his expression pained. 'It isn't working.'

'What isn't?'

'All the things I've striven for. My mission is falling apart around me. I'm not in control.'

'So what's new?' she said, cajolingly. 'I don't recall Paradise Towers being any bed of roses either, but we got through that one.'

‘It’s not the same,’ he said, his ferocity unnerving. ‘It’s not nearly the same. This affects Earth, it affects Time, it affects you and me and too many of those I have travelled with.’ His eyes misted over and he seemed to be looking far, far away. ‘I should never have lied to them.’ He put a hand to his forehead, closed his eyes, and now he wasn’t even talking to her. His attention had been turned inward.

‘No, I won’t accept your argument. You would have barged in and made things worse. I have this body now and I will do what’s right!’

One gate had been twisted back on its hinges; the other was lying flat beneath Dr Who’s battletank. The two boys in the vehicle’s rear were levering themselves free and running, panic-stricken, out of the grounds and away from sight. Jason shouted something incomprehensible after them, an expression of abject betrayal on his face. Men in suits and uniforms were streaming towards him and Cruncher emitted a bloodcurdling war-cry as he stepped forward to deal with them. He closed with the first one and took him in a headlock, evacuating the breath from his lungs and dropping him, unconscious, on his back.

Chris moved in, closer than most of the public dared, but faltered behind the tank as bullets started to fly. Cruncher waded into the defenders regardless, laughing raucously and downing at least four with ruthless ferocity, even after the first few slugs had managed to penetrate his body. He pirouetted as a plume of blood erupted from his chest and he fell without grace, landing atop one of his hapless victims.

‘Cor, ’struth!’ exclaimed Jessie, at the door of the tank. Chris reached to pull her away from the fracas. As they touched, she dispersed into mist; another figment of his erstwhile 167

companions’ imagination. The battletank went with her, its usefulness over.

Alone now, Dr Who and Jason were running for the main entrance, but guns covered them from both sides. Someone shouted that they should give themselves up and Chris wanted to add his voice to that cry, to prevent the duo’s inevitable fate.

No matter what they had done, they didn’t deserve this.

But Jason turned and screamed in defiance and, as Chris started forward but stopped, knowing that to enter the firing zone was futile, two great golden scoops appeared and shovelled the young man’s

enemies away, upending them into frenzied tangles of arms and legs.

Chris boggled. What were these two? He ran after them instinctively, across the forecourt, unsure what he could do if he caught them. But the security men recovered fast from their unexpected repulsion. A dozen weapons swung to cover him and Chris halted, arms high above his head, being sure not to look as if he posed a threat. Dr Who and Jason disappeared through the archway of Buckingham Palace's principal entrance. Chris was ordered to lie flat on his face and, slowly, carefully, he obeyed.

Someone shouted his name, and the last thing Chris saw as two men in uniforms rushed over to him and buried his raised head in the concrete, was Roz Forrester, standing on the far side of the outer railings.

As his arms were wrenched up behind his back and his wrists connected by uncomfortable manacles, Chris felt a heady surge of relief.

The train was still not moving. And, in the absence of engine noise, a thick silence had enveloped its hindmost carriage, where the Doctor cradled his head in his hands and looked tired and ill.

'So much guilt, so many choices,' he said, after remaining quiet for so long that Mel suspected he had dozed off. 'So many voices in my head.' He looked up and she was alarmed to see red rims about his eyes. 'So many failures before me. Goth, Hedin, the Master, Ruath, even Borusa. Myself, in one possible 168

future. I thought I'd averted that. How could I really have hoped to avoid it?'

Her uncertainty about him was beginning to erode beneath a sympathetic tide. At the same time, Mel felt some measure of fear. Of him; of what he had become. 'What voices?' she asked carefully.

'My past selves,' he grumbled.

'They still exist? I mean, physically? Or is this some sort of . .

.' She groped for the words.

'The body renews itself,' the Doctor said without emotion,

'but too often the mind can't handle the multiplicity of psyches.

It's why the number of regenerations was limited. But still, it's hard to stay in control.'

'How can your past selves exist?' she protested. 'They're you, aren't they?'

'They're part of me.'

'Part of your memories. What you're describing is a . . . a multiple personality disorder!'

He looked at her. His eyes were burning intensely. 'I'm sorry.'

She gave a nervous laugh. 'What for?'

He reached for her hand and she almost withdrew it. But she let him take it, with surprising tenderness. 'I couldn't let it go on. I had my mission and I did what I had to. But I'm sorry I sent you away, Mel, that you were stranded. I should have found a better way.'

'What do you mean?' She tried to laugh again. 'I left of my own volition, Doctor. You can't take the blame for what happened next.'

His expression spoke otherwise. Mel felt confusion, then sadness and frustration — finally, anger, as a long-denied truth was made unmercifully clear.

'Oh no,' she whispered in horror. 'You didn't!'

UNIT jeeps screeched onto the flagged plaza. Khaki-clad soldiers pushed back spectators and erected yellow tape boundaries to discourage their return. Bernice set her sights on the handsome, thirty-something man with Captain's pips at the 169

Palace gates. He seemed to be coordinating the effort. She glanced at Roz and shot an arm out in time to stop her from drawing her gun. 'If you do that, we'll be covered in army grunts in seconds!'

'It's to establish our credentials,' said Roz sullenly. 'We've got to do something. They're sending people into that building and they don't know what they're facing!'

'Unless Chris told them.' Benny nodded towards the truck into which their unprotesting friend had been bundled.

'That's another thing.' Roz scowled and fingered her weapon in its holster.

‘There’s a better way,’ Benny said firmly. ‘I know how to handle this lot.’ She looked each way, saw that no eyes were on her, and vaulted the makeshift barrier, bearing down on the Captain and smiling as she sensed that Roz had fallen into step behind. Someone shouted as he spotted them, but Benny ignored the booted footsteps of troops hurrying to intercept. By the time they arrived, she had tapped the senior officer’s shoulder and pushed a temporary UNIT pass beneath his nose.

‘Sorry about this, Captain Tavistock. We’ll get rid of them.’

The officer waved his subordinate aside, his eyes on Benny, his interest engaged. She smiled, reading Roz’s impatience from her stance. She needn’t think she was taking over here.

Captain Tavistock tore the pass down the middle and stuffed the two halves into Benny’s hand. ‘You don’t look like a

“Jeremy Fitzoliver” to me.’

Well observed,’ said Benny, equally cool. ‘Now listen up: in about a minute, your two perps will come back out. That’ll be your best and only chance to take down the young man in blazer and shorts. If he gets a second, he’ll obliterate us with a burst of fictional energy. Shoot to wound if possible, but ignore his friend. He’s not important.’

‘Orders, sir?’ asked a young corporal, bemused by all this.

‘All right, Harvie. Tell Sergeant Head to get onto Geneva. We have a Code 4-2-3. The Brigadier will want to be here.’ The soldier acknowledged his instructions and hurried off. Tavistock turned back to Benny and gave her a tight smile. ‘I am right, 170

aren’t I, young lady?’ Roz sniggered at the term of address.

‘You are with the Doctor?’ said Tavistock.

Once Bernice’s credentials had been established, Captain Tavistock moved swiftly into action. He communicated with soldiers already inside the Palace and ordered them to take no offensive action. There was little danger, after all: the staff had been all but evacuated and the Queen herself was not in residence — a fact which the Doctor had ascertained from the building’s empty flagpole, and which Jason would no doubt learn at any moment.

Despite Roz’s brief protestations, Chris had not been freed.

She would work on that as soon as the immediate situation had passed. She crouched at the railings, eyes firmly fixed on the main entrance through the sights of her blaster. She held her breath as Dr Who emerged at last, striding towards the mangled gates with head down and hands behind his back, unmindful of the deadly ambush.

Three agonisingly long seconds passed, then Jason appeared.

Roz cursed as she saw that he was clad in shining, golden armour. She fired anyway, as did a dozen UNIT soldiers. Jason whirled, alarmed by the barrage, but the regulars' bullets glanced harmlessly of his protective clothing and Roz succeeded only in blowing a chunk off the building's stone façade.

Benny grabbed Tavistock and told him to cease fire. 'He's obviously prepared for us,' she insisted. 'We can't stop him, and if we don't get out of his way . . .'

The Captain was uncertain, but he nodded and raised his voice to give the order.

The attackers pulled back to allow Dr Who, nonchalant as ever, through. His companion came after, seamless armour clanking, and as he rushed past Roz, she heard him bawling miserably.

'It's up to the Doctor now,' said Benny quietly. 'I hope he got to Sheffield in time.'

* * *

171

Mel barely registered that the train had started to move again.

She hardly cared that they might lose the all-important race. She was standing in the centre of the carriage, her back to the Doctor, hugging herself and mulling over what he had told her.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became.

'Why?' she demanded finally, rounding on him. He looked hurt and she struggled to remember that she was the injured party here. 'Why did you abandon me?'

'It wasn't like that.'

'It sounds like it was! You influenced my mind, made me leave the

TARDIS and go with Glitz — Glitz, of all people. I'm surprised he didn't jettison me straight out of the nearest airlock!'

'I thought it was best.'

'For who? Me?'

The Doctor stared steadfastly out of the window. His voice was strained. 'For everyone. I had my mission.'

'Oh yes. Your "mission". Bernice told me a little about that.

And I didn't fit in, I suppose.'

He shouldn't have chosen you.'

'Your past self, you mean?'

'Another of his mistakes.'

Mel's ire boiled over. She grabbed his shoulder and forced his head round to face her. 'The Doctor I first knew was a lot more human than you. He cared for people!'

The Time Lord's face contorted with disdain. 'He was halfway to becoming the Valeyard. He almost killed you, here on Earth, at Canary Wharf Tower in 1999. He would have sacrificed you to save his own soul!'

Mel pulled away and tore at her hair frustratedly. Inside, she was trying to deny his words. 'This is stupid — you're justifying yourself by saying that you used to be far worse!

We're both talking about your sixth persona as if he was a completely separate entity!'

The Doctor clearly didn't want to be participating in this conversation. 'Who's to say what defines self?' he mumbled, still avoiding her eyes. 'Continuity of body? Continuity of 172

psyche? I don't have either. Not even all my memories are intact. I'm not the man I used to be, Mel. I'm not any of them.

Thankfully.'

'You still haven't explained why you made me leave!'

‘Fenric had sent Ace. I couldn’t avoid my new responsibilities any longer. I had to take charge. I had to start the game. I thought you would be safe with Glitz. You didn’t have a role in the mission.’

‘You mean I wouldn’t have agreed to your dubious methods

— I might have stopped you from doing what you wanted!’

‘Perhaps.’

Mel stared at him furiously. Then, trembling, she announced:

‘You’re right. You are a different person.’

For the remainder of the journey, nothing more was said.

Jason punched the TARDIS console. ‘It’s not fair!’ he said for the fourth time. ‘It works everywhere else, why not on Earth?

Why wouldn’t people join our rebels? Why did they stop us from replacing their ruler? Why didn’t we win?’

Dr Who put an arm around his shoulders. ‘Not to worry, lad. I promise you, this isn’t over yet.’

‘But what can we do? The Queen’s henchmen are everywhere, and she’s run of and hidden from us!’

Dr Who smiled. ‘Trust me.’ He approached the wall and pulled open a roundel, revealing a storage cupboard in which he rummaged.

‘What about Chris?’ Jason asked. ‘He was coming after us as we went into the Queen’s house. He decided to join the good guys. We can’t leave him with the baddies.’

‘We’ll come back for him,’ Dr Who promised. ‘Right now, I think it’s just as well that he isn’t here. He might still flinch from what we have to do.’

‘What’s that?’

Dr Who produced another of his futuristic contraptions. ‘First, we use this portable Queen detector. Then we do something I had hoped to avoid.’ He flicked a switch on the machine and it bleeped as the word ‘SHEFFIELD’ popped up in LCD lettering.

This time, Dr Who’s hand left the cupboard holding the 173

biggest laser blaster Jason had ever seen: an insane agglomeration of chunky shapes and important-looking dials.

Conspicuous red letters spelt out 'ACME' down one side. 'I'm afraid there's only one way left to deal with this country's despotic dictator.' He brandished the weapon.

'It's megatomic death time!'

19

Who Dares

PC McCracken was tired and bored.

This is the modern-day police for you, he thought. Dragged out of bed at the crack of dawn, jammed onto a bus and carried two hundred miles south because transfer charging made it seem somehow better for the West Yorkshire constabulary to call on Glasgow than to ship reinforcements across the Pennines.

He stood with his back to the glass facade of the Ponds Forge International Sports Centre, baking in his flak jacket in the mid-afternoon sun. Although the Queen would only be briefly visible here, an impressive crowd had gathered. McCracken's job was to keep them off the paved forecourt, out of harm's way. They massed on the roadside below and on the network of walkways which bridged Park Square and linked Sheffield city centre to Castle Market and the Wicker, carrying the Metrolink line across Sheaf Street to the station. The crowd waved Union flags and eagerly awaited a glimpse of their monarch as she emerged from her tour of the refurbished complex. Wherever McCracken looked, he could see men in uniform — and that was apart from the plain clothes cops and the Queen's own personal guard. Don't know Why we waste so much manpower, he thought surlily. It's not as if anything's likely to happen.

Of course, if McCracken had suspected he was currently a character in somebody else's story, he would have avoided such portentous thoughts at all costs.

* * *

Dr Who and Jason waited for the old, grey and white tram to rattle by, then stepped across the track and joined the throng.

‘Are you sure we’re doing the right thing?’ Jason asked.

‘We’ve tried all else,’ said Dr Who, reasonably. ‘We must sort this world out somehow.’

‘But there are so many people here.’

‘That’s all the better. When the deed is done, we can pass unnoticed amongst them.’

‘What if they . . . you know, try and stop us?’

‘They’ll be too panicked. Now, what do you think of this spot?’

Jason pushed his way rudely between two people, leaned over the parapet and inspected the centre’s main entrance. ‘Not such a great angle, is it?’

‘I’m a good shot.’

‘What about up there?’ Behind them, the bulk of the spectators had gathered where the blue handrail curved to the right and ran parallel to the front of the building, affording the best view of the main doors.

‘We’d have to get to the front. We’d be trapped there, and we might have to run.’

‘I don’t think this is the best place at all,’ said Jason doubtfully. ‘Why don’t we wait at the town hall for her speech later on?’

Dr Who laughed dismissively. ‘Not such a good idea, Jason.

That’s where they’ll *expect* her to be assassinated!’

Behind them, unnoticed by either of the odd pair, a woman sat on a curved, blue metal seat, a fawn trenchcoat buttoned around her despite the warmth. She held a newspaper in front of her face, although she wasn’t reading it. She peered over its top and smiled as, after two weeks of unsuccessful trips through time, she finally caught sight of her quarries.

Bingo! thought Ace.

The Doctor and Melanie emerged from the rail station, the Doctor striding ahead with thunder in his expression. Across Sheaf Street, the

Hallam University Union of Students welcomed visitors to Sheffield in bold white letters. Mel leafed through her copy of the local paper, the Star, obtained from the 176

station concourse. When she looked up, the Doctor had halted and was staring inquisitively towards her.

'The Queen will be at Ponds Forge,' she reported shortly. 'A leisure complex.' She made for the city map but, without a word, the Doctor had marched off purposefully to the right. She tutted and followed, noting that the road had been blocked and that guard-rails prevented pedestrians from straying onto it.

The Doctor produced a small, handheld device from his pocket and studied it as he walked. Mel recognized the homer, and from the way it bleeped, she guessed the TARDIS wasn't far away. That wasn't good. Wherever the ship was, so too were Dr Who and Jason. They had got here first.

A murmur ran through the spectators; the air was becoming suffused with a potent charge of expectancy. PC McCracken shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot and looked forward to the dispersal of the crowd and the opportunity to sit down at last. What was he doing here anyway? 'It's not as if anyone's going to shoot down the Queen, is it?' he grumbled.

Ace folded her *Independent* and readied herself for action. She hoped she was doing the right thing, but she couldn't be sure.

'The Queen's shooting,' she would tell the Doctor later, in the TARDIS. 'It was the fifth event on my list of places you were most likely to be. With all the weirdness that surrounded this one, it was almost a cert.'

'If you knew what would happen,' Melanie Bush would ask,

'then why did you just stand there and let it?'

'I'd already seen it. In the papers, in the future. I thought We'd destroyed enough butterflies already.'

Ace shrugged off the cumbersome overcoat and draped it across one arm, her gun concealed beneath it for now. One or two glances were drawn by the trendrils which encircled her chest, but most eyes were on the doors, awaiting the Queen's appearance.

And, although not many knew it yet, the tragic events which were to

follow.

Mel felt the almost tangible excitement as they raced up Sheaf 177

Street. She could see the Ponds Forge building through two sets of temporary railings, but the only way of getting closer without opposition was over the walkways, and they had no time to negotiate passage through the crowd up there. The atmosphere itself told them that precious commodity was exhausted.

The Doctor whirled suddenly and Mel almost ran into him.

She opened her mouth to speak but he thrust the homing device at her and told her to head for the TARDIS. 'Over the bridge and towards the city centre,' he said, pointing vaguely past the sports centre. 'I dare say Jason will forget his force field at any moment.' Then he vaulted the first fence. By the time Mel's mind had formed a comment, he had reached the road's far side and was drawing policemen like a magnet draws iron filings.

She spared him one last glance, then sighed and took the upwards-leading ramp at a run.

Overhead, time shifted into slow-motion as Jason stiffened with fear and anticipation and knew that this had to be the moment.

Queen Elizabeth emerged from the Ponds Forge building, radiant in her powder blue skirt and blouse with matching hat and pearl necklace. The crowd erupted into cheers and flag-waving, the appreciative noises swelling as she treated them to a gracious smile and a wave of her hand. Her escorts were guiding her towards her car, at the centre's side. She took what seemed like minutes to traverse the forecourt, each pace measured, and yet she was across it almost before Jason could comprehend that she'd been there at all.

With a pang of desperation, he realized that his moment was passing swiftly. He turned to his companion, but there was consternation on Dr Who's face. 'I can't get a clear shot!' His voice slurred as seconds continued to pass like dripping molasses. The crowd had surged forward and were leaning over the parapet, some dangerously so, to prolong their view of their beloved monarch. Their heads bobbed into the line of fire, rippling flags obscuring his sight of the Queen. She was almost at the cars and Jason felt the emptiness of an opportunity fast disappearing.

He clutched at the first straw he could think of. It's a smart 178

gun!' he cried, illogically. 'The blaster . . . if you lock the sights on, the bolts will find her whatever's in the way.'

'You're right,' said Dr Who. He reached into his jacket, whipped out the extravagant weapon, leaned back over the railings and fired. He accomplished all this in one movement but, to Jason, that half-second stretched into a terrible lifetime in which all options fell away and there was only the cold certainty of what he'd just made happen.

Two yellow fireballs streaked from Dr Who's blaster. They swerved upwards, avoiding the intrusive heads, and paused in mid-flight to reorient themselves, like striking eagles, upon their prey. Another fraction of a second passed and horror rippled through the crowd as the gunshot crack reverberated like a drum roll and some of them, just some for now, began to appreciate the tragedy in progress.

The fireballs blazed a trail behind them as they swooped unerringly towards their target.

The escort went for their weapons as the sound reached them before the meandering bolts.

The Queen began to turn, alarmed, and took the full force of the fireballs directly in the chest.

Dr Who let the gun drop off the edge of the walkway, took Jason's hand and ran.

A horrific explosion of blood blossomed from the monarch, splattering against her bodyguards, blinding them and tarnishing the centre's sparkling glass.

The Queen fell.

The blaster hit the road with an extended clatter.

A whirling ball of fury cannoned into Jason's solar plexus and brought him down. He felt the concrete hit his back, looked up and registered the snarling face of the Doctor's companion, Ace. Her right hand was raised and poised to bring a gun butt down on his head.

Time snapped back to normal and people began to scream.

The Doctor's skin crawled with freezing dread and his stomach felt as though it had been scooped out. This couldn't be happening to his timeline! He pushed through the horror-179

stricken onlookers at street level, stepped over a rope barrier and crested the steps to the centre. Feigning authority amidst chaos, he was able to reach the Queen's side unchallenged.

She lay in an undignified sprawl, surrounded by staff who, for all their concern, were unable to do much. The Doctor knelt beside her, cursing himself for failing to prevent this. Someone registered his presence, belatedly, and a harsh voice demanded to know who he was. 'Don't worry,' he threw over his shoulder,

'I'm a personal friend of your chief.' When in doubt, try name-dropping. 'Still Paul Condon, isn't it? Such a sweet man.' He needed to inspect the wound, so he reached down and peeled the Queen's half-melted blouse open. A strong hand gripped his collar and yanked him into the path of a hurtling fist. He reeled and steadied himself to find a half-circle of rifle barrels aimed at him.

He covered his eyes and shook his head. The security men were uncertain about him so he followed through the momentum of his spin, ducked and slipped through them before they knew what he was doing. If Dr Who and Jason had done what he thought, he was needed elsewhere.

Dr Who gripped Ace's wrist and wrenched it so that she dropped the gun. She cursed as he pulled her away from Jason, allowing the young man to regain his footing. She had had one chance and she hadn't been fast enough. If only there had been less people about; if she could have risked just shooting at him!

She struggled as Dr Who pinned her arms without effort and stared as Jason rose before her, face dark and eyes burning, infuriated by her attempt to subdue him.

It could have ended then, but for the petite form of a red-headed woman. She came hurtling along the walkway and into Jason, who staggered and almost fell again. 'Come on you lot,'

the new arrival shouted in a voice which Ace found strangely familiar, 'don't just stand there, help us!'

Encouraged by her spirited lead, a few people started forward.

One tackled Dr Who, and Ace felt his hold on her releasing. She pulled away but didn't look back. She knew that he wasn't important; the other woman seemed to realize that too. Whilst 180

the rest of the volunteers concentrated on the older man, Ace and her rescuer rounded on the true architect of their misfortunes. As Dr Who vanished beneath a tide of bodies, they rushed Jason, but glanced painfully off a yellow force shell; a barrier which vanished an instant later, so that most people didn't even see it.

Jason ran forward, tears in his eyes, and tried to drag the increasingly bloodthirsty vigilantes away from his friend. Ace went for him again and managed to achieve a headlock. She needed a few seconds to knock him out, but she didn't get them.

Dr Who was somehow free and beside her, with a replica of the blaster which had brought down the Queen. He was planning to kill her!

She let go of Jason and knocked the weapon from him. It discharged into the air and a circular gap appeared in the crowd as its constituents pulled away in panic. Dr Who took advantage of that distraction. As Jason spluttered and gasped for breath, he grabbed his companion's shoulders and muttered: 'We're leaving.'

Ace leapt for them, but the air rippled and then they were both gone. She collided with a bench and hit the ground, beside the red-haired woman who apparently had made the same mistake.

They locked eyes and froze, each peeling back the unkind years in the other's face and widening their eyes in happy recognition.

'Mel!' Ace cried.

'Ace!' Mel shouted, simultaneously.

Then Mel's brief joy visibly drained and turned to disgust as she took in the combat armour and gun. 'What has he done to you?'

McCracken couldn't believe his eyes.

By a mere fluke, he had been looking in the right direction, towards the walkways, when the unthinkable had happened. He had seen the assassin's face, before the panic had begun and the crowd had stolen his view. And now he could see it again.

The short man ambled with an astonishing nonchalance, past 181

the still royal convoy and up Commercial Street towards the city centre. He had found time, somehow, to change his jacket from

chocolate brown to cream, perhaps assuming that that would be disguise enough. McCracken hesitated, remembering the gun and its stomach-churning effects. But the killer's walk was deceptively fast: he was disappearing into the voyeuristic rabble already streaming towards the Forge. Spurred on by fear of losing him, McCracken ran.

It wasn't easy. His quarry meandered, weaving skilfully through the pedestrians in a manner which sought to frustrate pursuit. But McCracken was determined and, by the time the assassin had reached the busy Castle Square junction, he had almost caught him. He relayed his position by radio, his words coming out in a breathless staccato. Then, as the crossing light showed green, he followed the villain to the far side of the road and pounced.

McCracken patted the cream jacket down, relieved to feel no trace of the murder weapon. He must have disposed of it. He read out the statutory rights, so agitated that he stumbled several times over the new, four-paragraph warning. The short man gazed at him with unnerving intensity and made the constable feel like he was the guilty party. He didn't resist, but McCracken was taking no chances. He produced his handcuffs and manacled their wrists together, then pushed his prisoner back into the road, heart swelling as he realized the importance of this moment. He, Andrew McCracken, was bringing in the man who had killed the Queen of the Commonwealth! He could hear the wail of police sirens approaching from the crime scene.

Too late, he thought triumphantly. Even Inspector Waddell back home would have to crack a smile for this one.

Only as he waited for the third lane to clear did McCracken notice that the cuffs were hanging empty from his wrist. He cast about in panic and saw the suspect, back on the pavement and heading away. In a surge of desperation, he leapt after him, bringing cars to a screeching halt and causing a minor traffic accident. Horns blared furiously, but McCracken barely heard.

He raced onto High Street and saw the killer, some way ahead, 182

still practising that easy gait of his.

McCracken reached him at the edge of the pedestrianized shopping area. He grabbed him, spun him with more force than was necessary and slammed him against the wall, arm twisted behind his back. 'I don't know how you did that, Houdini, but this time I'm keeping a hold on you!' He glanced over his shoulder: his reinforcements were

fighting their way across the junction. Any second, they would scream towards him, to find they weren't needed.

The suspect squirmed and, for a heart-stopping second, almost managed to slip from under him. McCracken increased the pressure of his grip and, only then, saw the blue wooden structure on the periphery of his vision. An old-fashioned police box. He hadn't known they still existed outside his home city. It was disused, of course, but one door was open and that gave him an idea. A blow for traditional policing! He pushed the prisoner inside and closed the handcuffs over the handles of both doors, effectively locking them. Let's see him get out of that one, he thought.

Four squad cars squealed to a halt on the paving stones and the officers of several forces leapt out, eager for action.

McCracken greeted them with a broad grin and dreamt of his inevitable commendation.

20

Royal Flush

UNIT soldiers had searched Buckingham Palace thoroughly, alert for suspect packages or devices. They had found nothing untoward, and leave had been given for the building's occupants to return. The Yeomen of the Guard took up their lonely positions once more; the kitchen staff resumed their preparation of overdue lunches; in the Palace's own police station, a uniformed sergeant pored over an empty report form and searched in vain for a way of explaining the day's events.

Their renewed tenure didn't last long.

The feeling, some said later, began with a queasy sensation in the lower stomach area. It quickly grew into a nerve-wrenching terror and an absolute conviction that the building itself was driving them out. To the considerable surprise of Captain Tavistock, pages, courtiers and the last of his own troops erupted wildly onto the forecourt and ran as if for their lives, some screaming, many clambering over railings rather than divert their course towards a proper exit.

In less than five minutes, the day's second evacuation of the Palace was complete. Tavistock, himself repulsed from the east gate, by a

force he couldn't explain, knew that his problems were only starting.

On a faraway world called Detrios, cloaked figures massed and marched in grim columns along subterranean byways. At frequent intervals, they encountered black-uniformed security patrols. The guards always averted their eyes, for fear of causing offence. Not many of them, therefore, saw what was coming.

A would-be God called Enros had begun his attack on the 184

rulers' abode. The escape of the alien Christopher had seeded doubts in his followers' minds, so Enros needed this victory to prevent their flowering. He had planned to mount such an operation soon anyway. His power on Detrios was immense, but he would not be happy until it was formalized.

Enros wanted everything. He was no longer prepared to call someone else 'Superior'.

Back on Earth, beneath the tarpaulin roof of a UNIT jeep, two former Adjudicators shared a long-anticipated reunion.

'I'm so glad to see you!' enthused Chris.

'Turn around,' ordered Roz.

'I was worried you were dead.'

'Hold the cuffs out behind you.'

'Did you square things with the soldiers? Have you got the key?'

'I've got *a* key.' She produced her blaster and shot a bolt through the chain, allowing Chris to part his wrists. 'By the way, it's good to see you too. Come on.'

With the satisfaction of red tape thoroughly severed, Roz slid out of the vehicle and turned to see what was keeping her partner.

He was no longer there.

'Perhaps you should move behind the lines, miss,' suggested Captain Tavistock kindly. 'Things might get a bit dangerous here.'

Bernice folded her arms and glared at him. 'Oh, playing with bombs again, are we? Why don't you skip the egotistical military chest-beating and admit that you don't know what the hell you're dealing

with?'

'When I need advice from you, young lady —'

'It'll be too late!' Benny snapped. 'And if you call me "young lady" once more, I'll boot your gonads so far up your internal tract you'll be able to taste them!' Tavistock winced. Benny, pressing her advantage, knelt down by the gate and extended a cautious arm. Her hand tingled as if she'd received a mild static shock. 'This isn't just a wall that you can throw grenades at. It's 185

a field of some kind. Chances are, if you use physical force against it, you'll make it stronger.'

'Where's the Doctor?' Tavistock asked. 'Could he penetrate it?'

'I'm sure he could,' said Benny scathingly. 'I'm only one of his bimbos, after all.'

She became aware of the whining of a jet engine and she looked upwards. The early evening sunlight glinted off a silver wing. Benny picked out the UNIT logo on the plane's underside and she groaned theatrically. 'More testosterone-charged apes!'

'Looks like the new CO's arrived,' said Tavistock.

They stood as the craft descended vertically at the near end of the Mall. The noise was deafening and, even sheltered by the Victoria Memorial, Benny felt a blast of air which swept her hair back and stung her eyes.

'Oh, honestly!' she muttered. 'How ostentatious can you be?'

The rebels' meeting had dissipated into a series of small, indecisive knots of people, spilling out of the confined but and into the desolate city. Rokk had tried shouting, hoping to drive some sense into the minds of those who were starting to accept Enros's lies. With some of them, he had been successful. But a unified fighting force this was certainly not. He was beginning to realize that an alternative plan was needed.

He swept his foot through a dust mound, watching as it billowed up into the rich black sky and drifted, obscuring the Miracle with a grey haze. Rokk was starting to resent the steadfast presence of the shining crystal, which had given the cultists' leader such an undeserved boost in his popularity. He turned away from it and cast searching eyes over

the closest of his disconsolate comrades, wondering which of them he could trust.

He smiled as Myrg sidled up to him furtively. He had sent his friend on a spying mission two segments ago, although no one but themselves knew about it. Rokk was even more pleased when Myrg reported the news that he had most wanted to hear: that the cultists' attack on the Ruling Family had commenced.

'How are things going?' he whispered, drawing Myrg to one 186

side.

'The cultists are winning. The security forces are better equipped, but Enros has more people and the element of surprise. And they're fighting for keeps too. They don't care whether they die or not, just so long as they do what their

"Great Lord" wants.' Myrg spoke those words with derision.

Rokk nodded thoughtfully. 'Enros won't have much protection then. He'll have sent as many people as possible out to fight. This is our best chance to get him.'

'And our last. If Enros does come to power . . .' The sentence didn't need to be completed. 'Do we have enough support?'

Rokk looked doubtful. Not for an all-out attack, no. But Sang'sta is behind us, and Harp'r and maybe Feeni. And we still have three robes from the church.'

'You're saying —'

'We send in a small commando force. We don't even tell the others in case they go all soft on the idea and try to stop us. In disguise, we have as much chance of penetrating the cultists'

lair as thirty of us with sticks and battle cries have. Once we're in there, we can prove once and for all that Enros's death won't have any effect on the rest of Detrios.'

Myrg grinned. 'I can only think of one way to do that. And it sounds good to me!'

The Merlin T-22 Vertical Take-Off and Landing aircraft was still experimental, but Brigadier Winifred Bambera had requisitioned the

prototype on grounds of speed, comfort and, more importantly, making a damn good entrance. She could almost hear brass fanfares in her head as she jumped out onto the tarmac, adjusted her beret and slapped her swagger stick into her armpit to show that she meant business.

Her personal staff fell into formation and step behind her as she marched towards Buckingham Palace, suppressing a smile at the sight of a TV crew beyond the evacuated area. Bambera enjoyed creating an impression, particularly one which was recorded for posterity. She also enjoyed looking over a sea of camouflage jackets and blue helmets, knowing that all this was hers to command. Now if only the top brass would heed her 187

complaints and remove those goddamned wings from UNIT's polar projection logo, Brigadier Bambera would be truly happy with life!

'Who's in charge here?' she rapped as she arrived at the Palace and her entourage halted.

'I rather think I am,' replied a slender, dark-haired woman on the young side of middle age.

A pleasant-looking male officer wearing Captain's insignia pushed her aside and saluted Bambera, less precisely than she would have liked. 'Tavistock, ma'am.'

'I'd prefer "sir" actually, Captain. Who's this?'

'She's one of the Doctor's girls, sir.'

'But surprisingly,' the woman said with heavy irony, 'I have a name of my own too.' Bambera ignored her.

'Have you contacted General Lethbridge-Stewart, sir?'

'It's Bernice, if you're interested.'

Bambera almost spat with anger. 'Lethbridge-Stewart's semi-retired, Captain! Why does everybody expect me to keep running to him?'

'Bernice Summerfield.'

'I've met the Doctor before, I can handle the squirt myself.'

'Yes, nice to meet you too.'

‘What’s the situation?’

Tavistock moved aside, allowing Bambera to approach the Palace more closely. The air around it shimmered like. a heat haze and she blinked, not sure whether to believe her own eyes.

‘It appeared without warning, sir,’ Tavistock said. ‘It compelled everybody inside the grounds to leave, and no one has been able to return.’

‘It’s a physical barrier then?’

Tavistock shook his head. ‘It’s just a feeling you get when you try to pass through it.’

‘Like the Ganymede Rhinoceros Stunt Olympic Team has decided to use your diaphragm as part of a novelty trampolining act,’ Bernice Summerfield volunteered.

‘How very poetic,’ Bambera muttered. ‘Don’t mind if I try it myself, do you?’ Without waiting for an answer, she lowered 188

her head, stuck her lip out in determination and barged forward.

Her vision blurred and the sounds of activity from behind were muffled. She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the tide of sickness which rose in her stomach. She clenched her fists so tight that she thought her palms would bleed. She ignored the vivid impression in her mind that, on the far side of the disturbance, there were Cybermen, Yeti and alien knights waiting in ambush. She controlled that illogical fear, concentrating instead on thoughts of Ancelyn and the twins. Her temples began to ache and her legs were unsteady; her nerves were screaming at her to turn around.

Without conscious thought or action, she was back outside the barrier, in an undignified heap, the world shooting into focus again. She realized she was screaming and she closed her mouth, embarrassed. She picked herself up and glared from one soldier to another as if challenging them to smirk. They remained po-faced and avoided her glare.

Not bad,’ said an approving voice. ‘That’s about as far as I got too.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Bambera gruffly.

‘Forrester, sir. I’m with the Doctor.’ Bambera looked the woman over

with approval. Her well-toned musculature, her prematurely grey hair with its smart military cut and her general alertness all told the Brigadier that this Forrester was an experienced trooper, and very likely a good one. Not like the accountants and resource managers on fast-track career paths who had infiltrated even UNIT these days.

'We're not sure what's happening in there yet,' Forrester reported. 'We'd only just had the all-clear when the barrier appeared. Chances are, it's something to do with Dr Who and Jason.'

'And who are they?'

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. 'Hey, Miss Hitler-in-Army-Boots, I think you should look up there.'

On the Palace balcony, more rightly reserved for public appearances by the Royal Family, two men had emerged to survey the crowd of soldiers below. No, Bambera checked 189

herself, make that three men. The third was a stocky, blond-haired lad, who hung back at the balcony entrance and bobbed into view only momentarily.

'It's Chris!' Summerfield exclaimed.

'So that's where he went to,' breathed Forrester.

Bambera's gaze was rooted on the foremost figure: the all too familiar, part-frightening, part-reassuring form of the enigmatic Doctor. 'What's your alien friend doing up there?' she asked Forrester, grumpily.

'That's not him. It's a fictional double, created by the guy in the blazer on the right.'

Bambera grunted an acknowledgement of that information and looked at Tavistock, who seemed as confused as she was.

She stared up at the crazy tableau. The alien freak doffed his hat and waved graciously; she was aware of the explosion of a dozen flash bulbs from the media behind her.

'Shame!' Brigadier Bambera cursed.

Even trapped in her plush underground office, the Superior of Detrios managed to exude an aura of power and majesty. She remained implacable, a shimmering shape of blackness behind her plastic desk,

and she coolly eyed Darnak and Merrioc as they flanked the barricaded door, guns ready. ‘May I remind you,’ she said, ‘that it is your responsibility to die to protect me when the moment comes. You first, I think, Darnak.’

Politik Darnak didn’t know which he feared most: the approaching sounds of battle without or the steel-willed, haughty dictator within. He felt his hand sweating around the blaster weapon’s cold butt and, for an absurd moment, he thought it was going to slip out of his grasp.

He was going to die.

That thought was only beginning to seep into his brain. With each crackle of gunfire and each whoop of victory from the cultists, it penetrated a little further.

‘I wish you to know, Darnak,’ growled the Superior, her composure melting just a little, ‘that I hold you personally responsible for all this.’

Darnak gritted his teeth, experiencing the familiar hot flush 190

and helpless misery of humiliation at her hands. It occurred to him that, with death closing in, he didn’t have to put up with her jibes this time.

‘It was clearly the prison escape you allowed which emboldened these . . . these *commoners* into thinking they can usurp me!’

‘Actually, ma’am,’ said Merrioc ingratiatingly, ‘it occurs to me that Politik Darnak was also the last representative of the Ruling Family to communicate with the legions of the Undying One. I wonder if perhaps he upset them?’

Darnak glared at him. The Superior was pacing angrily. A few seconds later, she turned and shouted again: If you had had the courage to take on just three cultists in Street 4, I would have been in the battleship *Morningstar* and safely off this planet by now. I swear, if I die today, I will come back to haunt you, Darnak!’

Somebody screamed, immediately outside the door. All present knew that it was almost certainly the last of the Superior’s personal guard. Darnak’s heart quickened and he fumbled with his blaster. It slid from his trembling hands, hit the floor and discharged into the office wall.

‘You fool!’ the Superior shrilled, marching around the desk to where her presence could more effectively intimidate him. ‘A lizard man could be better trained than you, Darnak!’ She pointed a perfectly manicured fingernail towards the site of impact. ‘And the repair for that is coming out of your pocket!’

Darnak broke. He slapped her across the face and yelled, in barely coherent, staccato tones: ‘Shut — up — you — selfish

— manipulative — tyrant!’

The Superior’s nostrils flared and her lower lip quivered in speechless fury. Darnak felt light-headed. One voice in his head told him he’d just made the biggest mistake of his life. Another crowed: What the hell? It’s over anyway!

His outburst, unsurprisingly, was met by silence.

Total, absolute, silence.

It took a moment for Darnak to realize what that meant. And even then, he didn’t believe it. Not until Merrioc’s satisfied 191

proclamation: ‘I can’t hear anything. The fighting’s stopped.’

He paused, enjoying the moment. Then, for no obvious reason other

than to rub salt into Darnak's metaphorical wound, he expounded: 'Enros must have given up.'

Darnak's legs went weak as the Superior squared up to him with a look that said she was going to take great sadistic pleasure from what came next. Terrified, he inadvertently looked into her eyes. It was true: they were like obsidian pools.

Or rather, he thought as his stomach roiled and he dropped to his knees, like black holes, drawing him into their fatal embrace. He opened his mouth, not too proud to abjectly beg for forgiveness.

Then the door exploded, catching Merrioc unawares in a blizzard of wood splinters, and the room was suddenly swarming with cultists.

Darnak thanked the Miracle that he was only going to die after all.

Roz and Bambera crouched side by side at the edge of the barrier, whilst Benny and Captain Tavistock looked on and were disregarded. Roz had prised open her blaster and was prodding at its insides with a length of wire.

'If the energy from this thing can get through the barrier,'

asked the Brigadier attentively, 'then why did your shots bounce of it?'

'Too much too fast,' said Roz. 'The field is set to reflect energy, but without a real physical presence, it can't do that with one hundred per cent efficiency.'

'I see. So we drip it in slowly.'

'That's right, sir. It's a tried and trusted procedure. I did this a hundred times when I was in the Adjudication Service.

Eventually, the field will reach saturation point and the whole thing will blow.'

'Eventually?'

'It could take anything from ten minutes to an hour and a half.'

'Will your power pack last that long?'

If not,' said Roz, 'we can use Benny's.'

‘Oh, I exist now, do I?’ said Bernice.

Roz pushed the cannibalized weapon into the field area. A short, thin beam whined from its muzzle. ‘When it does go down,’ she said, ‘we’ll have to move in fast — before Jason finds out and thinks of something else.’

They stood up and Bambera gave her a congratulatory clap on the back. ‘Good work, soldier!’

Bernice and Tavistock exchanged a long-suffering look, united by helplessness.

They waited for the blaster to do its work.

21

Consternation Day

‘Why do you deny me?’

‘You don’t have a say. Your time is over.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘It has to be!’

‘Look where you’ve got us: our companions jeopardized and the timelines unravelling.’

‘You can make all the accusations you like. I won’t let you out:

‘You’re running from the truth.’

‘I’m doing what’s right.’

‘Why don’t you face me?’

‘. . . He’s coming round.’

The Doctor opened his eyes. White ceiling. He was lying on the TARDIS floor. Ace hovered over him. ‘Didn’t you leave?’

he muttered blearily. He blinked away thoughts of bad dreams.

He stood, rubbing his shoulder. It felt stiff.

Mel came into focus, standing at the console's far side. He peered myopically. 'You too?'

'Ace knocked you out,' she announced distastefully, 'as soon as you walked through the door.'

'I had to be sure you weren't the double,' Ace said apologetically. 'He doesn't have a sensitive nerve cluster in his shoulder.'

'I'm sorry I told you about that now,' he said ruefully. 'We're short of time. How long have I been out?'

'Fifteen minutes,' she said. 'Sorry.'

'Don't worry.' He allowed a hint of sarcasm to enter his voice. 'It's a tried and tested human procedure dating back to Medieval witch hunts. If the victim suffers extreme physical 194

pain and/or death, he's innocent.' He began to op erate the controls.

'Where are we going?' asked Mel.

The Doctor looked at her through misted eyes and teased out memories from his cotton wool brain. 'I don't know yet,' he said. 'But I'm sure it's important.'

Chris stood beneath an elaborate chandelier and swallowed at the sight of the twin thrones, raised up on a three-stepped dais.

They were only wooden chairs, he told himself, albeit gilded and upholstered with fine red silk. But they represented more.

Just being here made him feel dirty and treacherous; like he was rummaging in the Empress's bed chambers. He realized that that simile wasn't far off the mark.

Dr Who and Jason didn't help matters. They capered like children winning a trivial game: sitting down, getting up again and circling the room with wide eyes. They wouldn't tell him what they had done to the Queen. He felt sick at the thought that he might be an accomplice after the fact to regicide.

Chris had been invited to try a throne himself. He'd declined, just as he had held back in the balcony room during that debacle. He wanted no part of this, but he had little choice. His kidnap from Roz's side (Dr

Who ‘just happened to have’ a remote transmat device handy with which to rescue his friend) had left him in no doubt about the duo’s powers. He had to be careful about getting on their wrong side.

‘What are you going to do now?’ he asked, when he could bear their playful antics no longer.

The question seemed to sober them temporarily. Jason dropped into the left-hand throne and nibbled at a fingernail.

‘Pass a few laws, I think. Tax the rich for a squid-zillion pounds each. Sack the Prime Minister. Restore hanging for football hooligans and racists.’

And invading monsters,’ put in Dr Who.

Jason nodded eagerly. ‘And ban school uniforms.’ He turned to his colleague. I could never see the point of them, could you?’

‘I thought you were supposed to be making things better,’

said Chris pointedly.

‘We will,’ said Jason, hurt by that barb. ‘We can’t do worse than our last ruler.’ He jumped to his feet and ushered Dr Who into the vacated chair. ‘I’ve a surprise for you.’ He produced it from beneath his blazer: a magnificent tiara of interlocking diamond circles, an emerald slotted into each. Your crown.’

‘Oh, Jason,’ said the recipient with false modesty.

‘I got it from that horde of jewels down the corridor.’

‘I remember. But as I said then, that wealth could be better spent on ordinary people.’

‘But you must have a crown,’ insisted Jason. He lowered it onto Dr Who’s head and the older man didn’t resist.

‘Congratulations!’ Jason stepped back and beamed. ‘You’re now officially the King.’ He visibly tingled with pleasure. ‘Oh, this is perfect! I just hope the Doctor doesn’t come along and spoil it.’

‘I thought he was dead!’ exclaimed Chris, a desperate hope forming.

‘Well, he could be resurrected, couldn’t he?’

‘You know that doesn’t happen in real life,’ said Dr Who sternly.

‘This isn’t real life!’ his companion protested. Then his face fell. ‘Oh. Yes it is. I forgot.’

‘See, the Queen gets gunned down, blood everywhere, yet when the emergency services arrive, there isn’t a scratch on her.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘I can see why that would make the front pages. And why you might suspect my involvement.’

‘Especially since UNIT gave out their standard “No comment” line,’ said Ace. That usually means you.’

‘It’s becoming too easy to track me from media reports. Still, I rectified that in a century or so.’ They stepped from the TARDIS and onto a deep, crimson carpet. ‘So Elizabeth reaches her Golden Jubilee year after all?’

‘Yeah. I saw that in the papers too.’

‘But this was only your fifth choice of events?’

‘Fifth on the list I said,’ she corrected him. ‘I was doing them in reverse chronological order. It took me a fortnight to get this 196

far, and then I missed out the fourth one.’

‘You did?’

‘You told me to.’ The Doctor looked confused. Ace enjoyed tying him up in one of his own temporal tautologies.

A gasp of awe distracted her. Mel had emerged from the police box behind them and was staring in wonder. Ace had paid scant attention to their surroundings, but she looked now.

‘Not bad,’ she admitted grudgingly. She knew it was an understatement.

The enormous, high-ceilinged room was a delight in red and gold, offset by grey marble pillars and lavish floral displays.

‘We’re in the Great Hall of Buckingham Palace,’ the Doctor explained.

‘Really? Should we be here?’ Ace felt a weird sort of childish guilt, but tried to dismiss the sensation.

‘To judge by the absence of staff, I would say it’s essential.’

They climbed a magnificent staircase and strolled along the luxuriously furnished Picture Gallery. Ace felt distinctly under-dressed in jeans and T-shirt and her back was cold, missing the hopper’s presence. Behind her Mel dallied, examining each painting with a breathless enthusiasm. She found that irritating, but the Doctor was quietly patient. Ace wished her own portrait had been placed here instead of Windsor Castle. That’d show Mel who was changing for the worse.

‘You were at number three by the way,’ she mentioned, to break the silence. ‘My list, I mean. December 2001. You should see the trouble we’re going to cause there!’

‘And I gave you a hint about where to go next, eh? Not very ethical.’

‘You asked me to pass on a message too.’ This was the point she had wanted to make, but she hadn’t been sure how to broach it. She studied the Doctor’s face. ‘You said to do something about Kadiatu Lethbridge-Stewart.’

‘Oh.’

‘What did you mean?’

‘I think my future self should keep my nose out of our business.’

‘Doctor!’

‘Are you quite finished, Mel?’ The Doctor took on fresh purpose as he strode to the Gallery’s far end and halted at a set of mirrored doors on the right.

‘Where are we going?’ Mel asked, reluctantly tearing herself away from the art.

‘Throne Room,’ he said cursorily.

Chris started as the doors were pushed open. He felt a mixture of surprise, relief and apprehension when the Doctor entered, flanked by two women. His immediate instinct was to join them, but he pulled

back as he recognized Ace from the café in Glebe and one more of Dr Who's accusations was proved to be true.

Jason rounded on the new arrivals and screamed: 'What are you doing here?'

'I wish to speak to the King,' said the Doctor glibly. He approached the throne.

'You aren't allowed,' Dr Who warned. Chris shuffled, feeling conspicuous by the doppelgänger's side.

The Doctor sounded furious. 'Why not? Afraid to face your subjects? Hiding behind guards, giving orders, immune to the consequences? I have a complaint. I have several complaints.

An old woman is living in a box in Hyde Park, an innocent man is in prison, your trains don't run on time, there's a cracked paving stone on Denmark Street, Earth's magnetic field will reverse in four years' time and the corner shop has run out of rice pudding. There are children starving, animals suffering, women afraid to leave home and bombs poised to eradicate this planet and what are *you* going to do about it?' He whirled and pointed his umbrella like an arrow. Jason recoiled.

'You can't blame me.'

'You're in charge, aren't you? You've ruled this country for forty-five minutes now and you haven't yet left your palace.

You are corrupt and indolent and you must be replaced!'

'That's enough!' Dr Who shouted. He was on his feet and the Acme blaster had appeared in his hands. He trained it on the Doctor's back, but his intended target didn't flinch. The 198

Doctor's eyes burnt into Jason's skull. Chris watched the frozen tableau and felt cold. There was so much he wanted to know, but he felt like he shouldn't draw their attention, like his merest whisper might bring disaster.

Ace was under no such constraints. 'Is that supposed to be a weapon?' she scoffed. 'It looks about as deadly as a dose of Molyneux's Radiation.'

'And half as amusing,' the Doctor said. He was concentrating on

Jason. ‘You did this in the Land of Fiction: put a storybook character on the throne and spoke through him. Are you afraid to confront me yourself?’ The young man didn’t answer.

‘Dispense with your servant. This is between you and me.’

‘He’s not —’

‘He’s your creation. He does what you wish, what you don’t have the courage to do yourself. If you can’t find that courage, you’ll never solve anything.’ Jason flinched and the Doctor lowered his voice, speaking more kindly. ‘Your heart isn’t in this. You saved my life. You allowed the Queen to live, although your dark side wished to dispose of her. You know what’s right and you don’t need a comic strip clone to tell you otherwise. Stand up for yourself.’

Jason circled warily and the Doctor pivoted to follow him. He was still in the gun’s sights. ‘What do I do?’

‘About what?’

‘About anything.’

‘Tell the shopkeeper to reorder.’

‘What?’

‘Rice pudding. One problem at a time.’

‘You’re the cause of our problems,’ Dr Who interrupted. Our first step is to stop you from doing more harm.’

The Doctor directed his answer towards Jason. ‘You shouldn’t believe everything you absorb from the TARDIS

databanks. Not until you have the maturity to interpret the information correctly.’

‘If you’re so good,’ said Jason defensively, ‘then why did you try to destroy Detrios?’ Those words made Chris feel hollow.

He remembered Kat’lanna’s face and he fought to hold down a 199

tide of misery.

‘I wasn’t trying to destroy it,’ said the Doctor. ‘The Detrians’

situation is of their own making; they have the technology to right it themselves.'

'How can you say that?' shouted Chris, without thinking. He fell silent as the Doctor turned his inscrutable eyes upon him.

Was there .a hint of surprise? A modicum of hurt, that his trusted companion could challenge his word? Damn it, why did *he* have to feel in the wrong?

The Time Lord resumed his explanation. 'The destruction of the crystal will not, in itself, doom the planet. It will simply return it to the situation it was in before all this began.'

'Which was?' Jason prompted.

'Desperate,' the Doctor admitted grimly.

'You mean they'll die?' piped up the red-haired stranger.

The Doctor glared at her, but unlike Chris, she was resolute.

'I mean they'll have to work to avoid extinction. And yes, the chances of their prolonging their existence are slim. But that problem already existed for them, its part of a natural pattern of growth and change. The fictional crystal is a stopgap solution which will have the side-effect of ending the universe. What would you have me do?'

Jason wasn't satisfied. 'Okay, but tell me why Earth's such a mess. You've visited often enough to do something.'

It was the Doctor's turn, evidently, to have a nerve hit. 'I couldn't expect you to understand,' he said. And he clearly hoped to leave it at that.

But the woman spoke again. 'You could try explaining!'

The Doctor shot her a filthy glance. Then he turned to Ace, who shrugged helplessly, and to Chris, who blushed and looked away. He felt he should lend support, give his friend the benefit of the doubt. But he wanted to hear the answer too much.

The Doctor took a deep breath and addressed them all, his tone subdued. 'I may be responsible for some of Earth's misfortunes. But then, I've saved your planet many, many times over. I've prevented invasions by Autons, Daleks, Cybermen and Axons, by Yeti and by

renegade Time Lords. But the more 200

I meddle in your timestream, the more fixed it becomes and the more dangerous then is the slightest change to the established order. It becomes like solving a Rubik's cube, when to bring one piece into position means dislodging the others. Only this conundrum has no final solution. I must keep coming back, to guide things along the right path, to prevent the sort of historical anomaly which could bring the timelines crashing down.' He looked at them earnestly, each one in turn, as if begging them for their trust. 'You're all from Earth, but from different eras.

This is Jason's present, Mel's future, Chris's past. If we change things in 2001 then Chris might not be born in 2954. He wouldn't then be instrumental in changing things now and a disastrous time loop would result. Even if Time could straighten that out, mankind might find its destiny altered.'

'Destiny?' Ace echoed.

The Doctor was tight-lipped. 'Even I don't know what the far future holds. I'd hate to even speculate.'

'If you'd never come to Earth,' said Mel, cutting to the heart of the matter, 'would it have been better?'

'I honestly don't know,' he said with appealing helplessness.

'I believe not. I try my best.'

He bowed his head, as if awaiting judgement. Chris decided to believe him. Mel spoke first, in a tightly controlled voice.

'That still gives you no right to murder the Detrians.'

The Doctor ignored her. He looked at Jason. Chris glanced towards the throne and saw that Dr Who had gone. 'And what about you? Can you see that things aren't as simple as we'd like to believe?' He reached out, but Jason pulled away. The air fizzed and the Doctor snatched his hand back. He blew on it and looked at Jason accusingly. 'Especially not when you possess such power.'

'I don't . . .'

'I thought you were taking responsibility. You do remember the Land of Fiction?'

‘I remember a dream about witches and super-heroes.’

‘And you recognize the energies which fill you, even if you don’t understand why they do. You know that the events of the 201

past two days have occurred because you wished them. Like the eradication of the planet Arcalis.’ The young man seemed taken aback. The Doctor pressed his advantage. ‘The TARDIS told me about that atrocity.’

‘It was the Trods’ fault.’

‘You know that isn’t true!’ The Doctor’s anger was showing again. ‘You accuse me of unspeakable acts, yet you yourself killed the harmless singing plants of Arcalis and wiped out the lizard people of Detrios —’

‘They were green,’ Jason whimpered.

‘And murdered how many tribesmen at the site of your so-called Galactic Prison? Because they got in your way!’

Jason’s hand flew up to his mouth and he stifled a sob. The Doctor’s face softened and he reached out again, not so close this time. ‘You can’t afford to play games with abilities like that. Come with me. I can make sure there are no more accidents.’

He left the proffered hand there for a second longer.

Two seconds. Three.

Then Jason reached for it.

And alarm sharpened the Doctor’s features as he turned to the doors and whispered simply: ‘Oh, no.’

Chris realized why in the next moment. He could hear footsteps: the tread of many boots on carpet, approaching.

For a moment, Jason didn’t know what was happening. He sensed the worry rippling through his visitors and he backed away, fearing trickery. The power rose and demanded release but he quelled it, remembering the Doctor’s words. He wanted to believe that the Doctor was right.

Then he heard the footsteps.

The Doctor had rushed to his side and was holding his shoulders. ‘Stay calm,’ he said, not heeding his own advice.

‘Somebody’s about to do something stupid, but I’ll handle it.

Don’t get excited, you aren’t in any —’

The doors flew open and the Time Lord wrenched himself away, placing his own body between Jason and the soldiers who were suddenly everywhere. The black woman at their head 202

aimed a gun at the Doctor, but another — Forrester, he realized, her image familiar from the TARDIS database — knocked it aside. Not him!’ She pointed at Jason and he knew she was going to kill him.

The Doctor was shouting, but Jason couldn’t hear him clearly.

He needed to defend himself. He blinked and was in the heart of an inferno and he could hear the Doctor’s words but it was too late and the power was at its height and wouldn’t be denied, so Jason panicked and released the fireball.

And everybody died.

203

22

Bad Dreams (3)

Jason woke up and it had all been a dream.

An unusually vivid dream, he thought, as he lay with his eyes closed and adjusted to reality. But no more than a dream, for all that. The trouble was, he couldn’t remember when it had started. Had it been before that business in the Palace? Or the shooting of the Queen? Perhaps he had never met Dr Who at all and he would look to find himself in his bedsit, stuck in a humdrum life.

There was only one good way to find out. He opened his eyes and they focused on grey roundels. Good! At least that part had been real. He was still the companion of Dr Who, zipping about the universe and fighting, green monsters to bring truth, justice and purity to all.

No, that wasn’t right. It wasn’t that simple. Whilst Jason had slept, something had changed.

He wished he could remember what.

Bernice woke, knowing it had all been real.

She remembered the barrier falling, herself and Bambera jostling for pole position whilst Roz slipped ahead of them both (at least she had managed to get in before Tavistock, although she still felt awful about tripping him like that). She remembered barrelling through the quadrangle, barely pausing to note the splendour of the Grand Hall (but allowing herself a chuckle at the sight of the TARDIS amongst its columns). The soldiers had fanned out and were trampling every deep-carpeted inch, but Benny had raced upstairs with Roz and the Brigadier.

They knew where the enemy would most likely be.

She remembered Bambera, barging her out of the way as they 204

reached the mirrored doors. She had caught her own reflection, gun drawn, at the head of this military rabble. She'd detested that sight and had seen in a moment of poignancy why she had so appalled Mel. Then Bambera had shouldered the doors open and they'd spilled into the Throne Room, where Benny had registered the Doctor's presence. And Chris's and Mel's and . . .

Ace?

There had been some confusion and she had faltered, not sure where to aim. Then the boy Jason had exploded into fire and, before she realized they might, the billowing flames had spiralled outwards and engulfed her.

That was when she had died. Died in flaming ashes.

Completely obliterated.

She turned that thought over, inspecting it from all angles.

She cuddled her pillow and stared at the familiar walls of her room and her discarded clothing littering the floor: all anchors to a reality that she needed to believe in.

Then her body shook and a snort of giddy laughter forced itself from her nose. To think, she had been worrying about unconsciousness becoming a habit. She hadn't died since . . .

oh, since Shadowfell, many months ago. And now I do it twice in one day, she thought. If I had life insurance, I'd be rich.

Jason's faculties returned and his nose wrinkled, detecting a heady whiff of ammonia. A heavy presence warmed his legs and he looked to see the green eyes of a tabby tom-cat regarding him placidly. 'Hello puss,' he said. Then it dawned on him what the animal had done.

Wolsey jumped off the bed and left unhurriedly, limping slightly. Jason peeled off his wet sheets and pyjama bottoms with revulsion. He placed his bare feet on the cold floor and stood, casting about until he saw a black tracksuit folded over a chair back. It seemed his size so he reached for it.

Then paused and frowned, as a stray memory returned . . .

The room was filling with soldiers, led by two of the Doctor's accomplices. He wanted to run but, paradoxically, he was too scared. He brought his hands up to protect himself that was all.

Jason tried not to think about it. Tried not to remember how 205

he had *killed them all with one tremendous blast* . . . He shook his head, annoyed with himself for letting the memories linger.

He slipped into the tracksuit and eased open the door. The corridor was empty.

He remembered: *standing in the Throne Room, the walls blackened with ashes of a dozen bodies drifting on a supernatural wind. Alone? Not quite.*

The Doctor was there.

Mel sat on the edge of her bed and glowered as the door opened to admit Ace. 'What do you want?' she asked frostily.

'I wanted to talk, but if you're not interested —'

'Why should I be? I don't know you. I knew a nice little girl called Dorothy.'

'I was never a "nice little girl"!' Ace countered hotly.

'Now what have you turned into? A hardened space bitch!'

'I'm a soldier!'

‘Fighting dirty wars. How many people have you killed, Dorothy?’

‘You don’t want to know.’

‘You’re ashamed to admit it!’

‘I’m ashamed of nothing.’

‘Tell me how many you’ve killed then!’

‘Four hundred and twenty-three!’ shouted Ace. ‘Satisfied?’

Mel drew back as if stung. Then she got to her feet and faced her visitor with an expression of loathing. ‘Get out,’ she said.

Ace glared back mutinously. ‘ *Get out!* ’ Mel screamed, losing composure.

Ace sneered. ‘I hope you never have to find out what real life is like, “Doughnut”.’

‘You saturated this room with fictional energy. Enough for me to manipulate, to change the end of your story just slightly.

‘Does that mean they’re not dead?’ A hopeful squeak in his voice.

‘No subconscious reprieves this time. You were too scared.

You incinerated all of them.’

Jason padded down the corridor, upset to hear the sound of 206

arguing beyond a bedroom door. Two women, shouting about whose lifestyle was best. He remembered the way to the console room, but there were raised voices there too.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I thought it was best.’

‘Not for me! And you expect me to sit back now while you kill her?’

‘That’s not it.’

‘Then take me to her!’

‘There’s no time. And believe me, Chris, it wouldn’t help.’

‘It’s not likely to hurt!’

‘I’m sorry, I can’t do anything.’

‘You can always do something.’ The Doctor’s eyes were wide and blue, encouraging this destructive young man, this parcel of energy, to calm down and do the right thing.

‘One thing?’

‘I believe you have the power.’

Jason hugged himself and moved away, fighting back the sobs which tore at his stomach. His story had turned sour. This hostility was spoiling it. Why did no one like each other any more? Why couldn’t they just get on with the adventure?

Bernice ran into Mel in the corridor and saw that she had been crying. She stepped in front of her and spoke before Mel could.

‘Look, I’m sorry I was funny with you. It’s just that you get so used to the Doctor’s ways — it’s hard to remember how strange they once seemed.’

Mel shrugged. ‘So he’s talked you round to his way of thinking. You’re still guilty by association.’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘Oh, it never is!’

‘No,’ said Benny firmly, ‘it’s not. He’s doing the right thing on Detrios, I can see that.’

‘What about your Seven Planets?’

Benny nodded morosely. ‘I try not to think about it. And I gave him hell at the time, believe me. He’s made things easier since — and he does do good, he’s risked his life on countless occasions. I can’t doubt that he does what he thinks is right.’

‘And you?’

‘I have to trust in him.’

Mel nodded. Bernice could see from her body language that she wasn't completely consoled. But she did appreciate that Benny was human. She smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring way. 'Tell me one thing.' Mel looked willing enough. 'As I said, the Doctor keeps risking his life. Since I've known him, he's been shot through the heart, had his mind ripped open by mechanical insects . . . I thought his head had been lopped off once.'

'Nasty,' agreed Mel.

'I've come to think of him as invulnerable. Yet you saw him die — one of him, at least. How did it happen?'

Mel pursed her lips. 'I didn't actually see it. I was unconscious at the time. But I think . . .'

'Yes?'

'Well, he fell over and banged his head on the TARDIS

console.'

Benny laughed until her sides ached.

Chris was sitting on his bed when Roz knocked and peered round the door. His knees were against his chest, his arms encircling them. He didn't say anything, so she moved quietly into the room.

She didn't want to do this, but it was her duty. He was her responsibility.

Chris didn't look up. 'He won't take me back.'

'The Doctor?'

'To Detrios. To Kat'lanna.'

'I see.' Roz should have known what to say to that, but the sentences wouldn't come together in her head. She took his hand instead and stroked it gently. It felt uncomfortable to see him like this, especially over a woman (and an alien too, although that shouldn't have mattered). She kept thinking that she'd lost him, and she told herself sternly that that was both ridiculous and selfish of her. Their relationship had never worked like that.

All the same, they had always been more than just Cwej and

Forrester, partners in the Adjudication Service. That was why Roz saw at that moment, clearly and obviously, what Chris both wanted and needed to hear. And that was why, against all logic, she said it.

She made him a promise. And, when she had done so, he looked at her finally and he smiled. They needed no more words. The bond between them compensated for mere verbalizations.

Jason was back on his bed, whilst Dr Who stood in the doorway, hands behind his back. 'You're scared,' said Dr Who.

'All that power. I killed those people . . . then . . .' Jason looked at his hands. They were shaking.

'You remember?'

'Almost. The last part's fuzzy.'

The Doctor had written something. He pushed the paper into Jason's hands, but the young man couldn't believe what he read.

'Concentrate. Concentrate on those ten words. Think them, believe them. Believe that nothing else matters.'

'You can control it,' said Dr Who. 'So long as you confront what's happening, work with the Doctor to do some good.'

'I thought you hated him.'

'I was wrong. That's why I must go. And why I can never come back.'

'No!'

'Sorry. But there's no choice. You have to grow up now.'

, 'I know,' said Jason, blinking back tears. When he looked up again, Dr Who had gone.

' *Concentrate. Ten little words!* ' He rubbed his eyes and those words swam into his vision, as though he had never forgotten them.

Ten words, in red biro on a scrap of white paper. Ten words with which to rescue a world.

' *Jason woke up and it had all been a dream.* '

The Doctor stood, long-faced, and watched the time rotor go through

its undulations. ‘I like the new one,’ Ace was saying.

‘Forrester. She told me what you’ve been putting her through. I gather I missed the mutant ninja turtles again.’ He didn’t respond, so she raised her voice. ‘You’re quiet, considering you just saved all our lives.’

‘Jason simply needed to hear some common sense.’

‘What about that business at the end?’

The Doctor shrugged. Sometimes, he delighted in making explanations. Right now, though, Ace could see that it was a chore. ‘I made him concentrate on reversing what he’d done.

Only by seconds — Bambera and her troops will have stormed the Throne Room to find nobody there.’

‘He must be powerful to manage that.’

‘Yes.’ The Doctor turned away. ‘There’s work to do.’

‘There always is.’ Ace smiled. ‘I’ve a few things on the agenda myself. I might check out the rest of my list, keep my hand in. Six more weird happenings. Any you could recommend?’ She thrust the print-out beneath his nose. He scanned it and handed it back.

‘You might find number eight quite interesting.’

‘I was wondering about the last one. Got any ideas why Canary Wharf Tower changed shape on the first day of 2000?’

‘You should steer clear. And don’t discuss it in front of Mel.’

Time to lay it on him. ‘And who shouldn’t I tell about Kadiatu?’

He flinched. ‘That’s not fair.’

‘No? This dimensional rift you’re worried about — it’s her fault, isn’t it? She caused it when her time machine burnt out of control. When she punched a corridor through space-time, she scraped the sides. But you’re keeping her name out of it because you don’t want any awkward questions about her.’ She studied the Doctor’s face, finding perverse pleasure in the knowledge that she had hit a nerve. ‘You’ve seen her, haven’t you? Since she vanished into the vortex and we

thought she might be dead?

But you haven't told Benny.'

'I have a decision to make, alone.'

'Fair enough. Just don't abandon her.' She almost added: Like you did Mel. She decided to spare him that for now.

210

Bernice and Melanie arrived in the console room together, and Benny brightened as she set eyes on Ace.

'Hi, you. It's been a while.'

'Not quite that long,' the Doctor chipped in. 'Ace left our future selves a few days ago, in December 2001.'

'In trouble again, I expect?'

Her cheerfulness turned to surprise as Ace charged across the room and enveloped her in a hug. She sounded tearful. 'Benny, of course. I forgot . . . you're alive in this time period!'

The older woman's mouth worked but no words would emerge. She gaped at Ace, who pulled back self-consciously —

then, catching her expression, began to rock with laughter.

'Gotcha!

'You utter bitch!'

They laughed together, but Benny saw that Mel didn't join in.

She stood, resentfully avoiding the Doctor's look. He had noticed too.

'I need two people,' he said gruffly, 'to enter the crystal and help seal the rift.'

'Fun's over,' Benny said, attempting to sound jovial.

'I can't let you go. Or Chris. It would mean taking a second mindblocking pill and the results of that could be most unpleasant.'

Ace cocked an eyebrow. 'Do I detect a hint that my assistance is

requested?'

'You, me and Roz.'

'I'm sorry. I can't.' Benny turned to see that the two former Adjudicators had arrived. Chris hung back and allowed Roz to do the talking. 'I've promised Chris that we'll go to Detrios.

There's somebody he wants to see there before . . .' She faltered.

'Before you murder everyone,' Mel leapt in spitefully.

The Doctor was clearly upset. 'You can't go back. Apart from all the other reasons, there simply isn't time.'

'Drop us off before you land on the Miracle,' said Roz. 'Pick us up when it's over. You can get back before the oxygen goes.'

'I need you in the crystal.'

'And I've told you, I can't go. I made a promise.'

Chris shuffled forward. 'I only want to save one life,' he said.

'She's special.' Benny almost cried for him. She couldn't imagine that even the Doctor could be unmoved by the appeal in those blue eyes.

Mel interrupted at the wrong moment. 'And don't think of asking me to do your dirty work for you, because I shall refuse too.'

'I hadn't considered it,' the Doctor said pointedly.

'In fact, I don't want anything to do with this evil errand of yours. I don't want to be here. I insist that you take me back to Earth this minute!'

The Doctor looked at them all then, his companions through this regeneration. And Benny saw in a moment of poignancy that he too had been hurt by all this.

What did he think of them all? Mel, the symbol of what he had once been, unable to accept what he must be now. Ace, foisted on him by Fenric but moulded until she became his own personal army. How did that make him feel when lie looked at her? Then there was herself, his first real choice; she thought of them as friends, but she had so often

chosen to overlook rather than to understand. How far did he trust her? And Chris and Roz, the latest soldiers in his war. Finding out the hard way just how dirty that war could be. He had tried to stop them finding out the truth. Was he worried about what they might think? Did he want their friendship or did he merely need their loyalty?

Did he rely on humans through choice or by necessity?

Benny started as the Doctor jerked into motion and petulantly flung his umbrella to the floor. She had scarcely seen such fury in him before. 'Leave me then. Go your own ways, like all those before you. I'm only trying to save your universe!'

The potency of the Doctor's outburst froze and silenced them.

The six travellers stood, divided, and no one knew how to cut through the awkwardness of that terrible moment.

Then a polite cough came from the doorway. Benny looked.

She had all but forgotten Jason, but he was there now, head bowed, hands fumbling. 'I'll do it. I want to make up for all the 212

trouble I've caused.'

The deadlock lasted a moment longer, more easily now. Then Mel pushed past the young man and strode into the ship's bowels. The Doctor accepted Jason's offer with a nod and turned back to the console. But it wasn't yet over.

'Doctor,' Roz cautioned, leaning over him, her tone allowing no room for argument. The Doctor turned and Benny expected further remonstrations. But their gazes locked and their postures softened. As, perhaps, each began to see the other's point.

'We have to do this,' Roz said firmly. 'It's for Chris. Because he's our friend.'

And the Doctor, finally, seemed to understand.

He set the coordinates for the planet Detrios.

213

23

Crystal Tears

Kat'lanna came to a breathless stop and wrung her hands wretchedly. 'We've missed them!'

'What is all this about?' asked Thruskarr in irritation. He had kept pace easily during Kat's mad dash through the tunnels, but he had been unable to get a word from her.

'Didn't you hear what Kersh'r said? Rokk's disappeared, along with two others.'

'So you think they've come down here. I follow that. But why pelt after them?' The lizard man cocked his head and regarded her through narrowed yellow eyes. 'You're not beginning to believe the so-called "Undying One" yourself, are you?'

'Don't be ridiculous!'

'So why not let Rokk do what we both think he's attempting?'

'Because of something a . . . friend of mine told me.' Kat squinted into the darkness. 'Rokk was right about one thing,'

she commented. 'This is the most open the cultists' quarter has been. We're near enough that, any other time, we'd have been picked up already.'

'And killed,' said Thruskarr pointedly. 'I am so glad you noticed. I was about to remark myself.'

Kat shifted nervously from one foot to another. 'You know, I've really been trying to talk myself out of this.'

'Of what?' asked Thruskarr warily.

'Of stopping Rokk from killing Enros.' She gripped her companion's arm to stifle a despairing groan. 'Believe me, Thruskarr, I'm convinced it is the only way to save this planet!'

* * *

214

Ryallen, recent convert to, but devoted follower of, the undying One, stopped two fellow cultists as they shambled into the church area. The foremost of them was struggling to carry a third robed man in his arms.

‘What are you doing here? Why aren’t you fighting for Our Lord?’

‘Our brother is injured. I am returning him for medical treatment.’

‘You heard Enros’s orders,’ said Ryallen sternly. ‘You should have left the fallen to his reward in the afterlife. Only winning this crusade is important.’ He turned suspiciously to the third man. ‘And why are you here too?’

‘Praying for his recovery?’

Ryallen reached forward and snatched back the leader’s hood.

‘Wait a nanoseg — you’re Myrg! The traitor!’

‘You can talk!’ said Rokk, who was cradled in Myrg’s arms.

He thrust a knife upward between Ryallen’s ribs.

Four servants of Enros burst into the Security Chief’s office.

They checked themselves at the sight of the man who was reviled and feared by Detrians only slightly less than the Superior herself. He was kneeling, his black pate turned towards them and his hands clasped in an unaccustomed gesture of humility.

‘Praise be to the Undying One,’ he intoned.

One of the cultists stepped towards him, her knife extended but shaking slightly in an uncertain grasp. ‘It is too late for conversions. You should have joined us earlier.’

The Security Chief kept his eyes meekly downcast. ‘I wished to do that, I swear it. But I felt I was more use to Our Lord here.

There are forces of evil at work against Him.’ The ugly little man picked his head up and rose cautiously. The cultists, though alert, made no move against him. He beckoned the leading figure towards a monitor and she watched as he operated a keypad to bring up an alarming graphic.

‘But that means —’

The Security Chief concluded for her. ‘There are intruders on Enros’s Miracle! They obviously intend to tarnish his glory. But 215

fear not, I have dealt with such situation before.’

The cultist lowered her knife, beginning to see that he was telling the truth. Her fellows hung back, just in case, The Security Chief's hands hovered over the controls. assume I have permission to instigate my prepared defences?'

The cubicle glowed red and reality faded to white.

An instant later, Mortannis and his six comrades were two hundred and fifty thousand miles away. It took a moment to adjust to the jerking sensation of matter trans. mission and the fact that they were now standing on the most revered object of their culture, apparently open to space. Only after that did Mort register the presence of the blue box and of the strangers beyond it.

There were three of them: a blond-haired young man in black jacket and shorts, an older, shorter man in a cream suit and a hard-faced woman in a short-sleeved shirt and dark glasses. It was she who turned and saw them first. 'Hell!' she shouted.

'Natives!'

She swung up a blaster with incredible speed and fired at the still-disoriented newcomers. One fell, and Mort leap into action, only a nanoseg after his giant comrade, Angh'enna. Darnak had been right: these people meant no good!

'No, Ace!' The Doctor grabbed Ace's blaster, but she resisted him. A second later, she was wrenched away by a mass of hurtling muscle. The five other men who remained standing leapt into battle also. The Doctor tried to shout something about the futility of war, to explain what he had come here for; but a double assault from both sides left him winded and when he tried again, his open mouth was rudely filled by knuckles.

He crumpled and felt the crystal's surface scraping his, back.

Four Detrians bore down upon him and he twisted and squirmed from under them, leaving them in an interlocking heap. Of their two fellows, the larger man had be felled by Ace, but she had lost her gun in the struggle. She was wrestling now with a square-jawed, heroic type and neither combatant was giving an inch.

Jason had retreated a short way and was watching, unregarded 216

by all. The Doctor used the time he had bought to shout to him:

‘Use your powers. Imprison them so we can talk!’

Jason’s mouth worked silently. Two of the Doctor’s erstwhile attackers had managed to disentangle themselves: one went for the Time Lord whilst the other thundered towards Jason, who turned tail and ran. Ace threw her foe, who landed on his back and was winded. As she closed in to finish him off, somebody yelled: ‘Mortannis!’ and two more Detrians seized her arms.

‘Fancy your luck then?’ Ace hissed.

The Doctor crossed his wrists to ward of punches. There was no time to talk to Jason, but theoretically, any one should be able to use the fictional forces here.

He staggered as a blow penetrated his attempt at shielding.

On his back again, the Doctor closed his eyes and focused his mind on the task of moulding reality. He sensed rather than saw the hurricane which blew his attacker of his feet. He landed, bemused, and the Doctor tried to form a cage around him. But the leader, Mortannis, was up again and springing for him. The Doctor reacted with instinct alone and a battering ram appeared from nowhere, its end cushioned to spare its victim undue harm.

As it shot towards Mortannis, he shrank back in fear . . . and the ram became riddled with rust and disintegrated.

The Doctor and Mortannis stared, each one as surprised as the other. Then the Detrian gave a smile through clenched teeth and snapped his fingers and suddenly there was a cannon between them, a flame sparking along its short fuse.

When the explosion came, it was all the Doctor could do to mentally resist a steel ball impact which was intended to be fatal. He was down for the third time and almost out, his brain aching from effort, cursing himself for being thrown off by Mortannis’s manipulation of the Miracle’s energies.

Then Mortannis’s head tilted back, alarmed, and the Doctor became aware of the roaring of a starship drive, The Detrian gave a warning shout: ‘The *Morningstar*!’ and threw himself to the ground, an arm curled over his head in a futilely protective gesture. The Doctor, face up, had a perfect view of the battleship’s underside as it screeched overhead on a 217

dangerously low pass, blowing his hair back and searing his eyeballs.

Above the racket, he could hear Ace screaming: ‘Who the hell thought up that thing?!’

‘Why didn’t you tell me this before?’ asked Thruskarr.

‘I don’t know,’ said Kat. ‘I was . . . embarrassed, I suppose.

That humans made the Miracle to discriminate against lizards.’

He touched her cheek softly. ‘I cannot blame a whole race for the actions of a handful, Kat. It is because of such attitudes that your Superior has so long persecuted my people.’

‘But do you see now why we have to stop Rokk?’

Thruskarr looked blank. Kat sagged. ‘No, I don’t suppose you would. I’ve only just worked it out myself. But think of it: if the Miracle does exist because of our beliefs, then what happens if ninety per cent of the people on this planet all believe at once that the planet is going to die?’

Thruskarr was beginning to understand. ‘You mean that, if Enros is killed —’

‘Then almost everyone will think that the universe is about to go with him! Most will have doubts, at least.’

‘And you think the Miracle will disappear?’

‘If enough believe it will, yes.’

Thruskarr mulled that over. ‘That might not be such a bad thing,’ he said finally.

Kat stared at him aghast. ‘Look, I know it’s not perfect, but it is the only power source we have!’

‘We can do better,’ Thruskarr said firmly. ‘But that’s not the issue, is it?’

‘It isn’t?’

‘If the Miracle dies with Enros, then that will be seen by many as final proof of his holiness. He may be gone, but his High Priests will no doubt take over with majority support. And there will be no way of

proving that they are mistaken!'

'You mean you agree with me? That we have to do something?'

'I agree,' Thruskarr confirmed. He peered myopically down the dark street which led deeper into Enros's domain, and he 218

spoke gloomily. 'We have to prevent the "Undying One's"

death — although it will mean our own capture and execution.'

Those who would face the most immediate consequences, should the Miracle vanish, were occupied by other concerns.

Ace was left breathless by the passage of the *Morningstar*.

But she was used to ignoring the demands of a combat-battered body. She scrambled and reached her gun, then rolled up onto one knee and began to pick of the rising Detrians, like military range target. One, two . . . then the Doctor's body hit and flattened her and, as Ace tried to protest, her eardrums informed her that the ship had circled and was on a second run.

'We're sitting ducks if it fires!'

'It won't,' the Doctor shouted over its engines. 'This is just to frighten us. The Detrians won't risk harming the crystal. Not, at least, while they think their soldiers have a chance.'

He whooped almost comically and held onto his hat as the air above them sizzled and a hole was blown out of the Miracle, two feet to their right. Ace thought she heard him mutter

'Wrong again', but with all the noise and Panic, she couldn't be sure. She did know that, if she didn't present a moving target, she might end up on the receiving end of the next beam. But, as she and the Doctor separated, Ace realized that moving in the blast zone of the ship's incredible downdraft was as difficult as it looked.

* * *

The Security Chief was hunched over the communications console in his office. The invading cultists were gathered behind him, convinced of his integrity by the images which the *Morningstar* relayed to his commu-screen. They still didn't wholly trust him, though. As he leaned forward to give the order to fire again, the female leader of the

group clasped a firm hand over the voice grille. ‘You must not harm the Miracle.’

‘I’ve no choice!’ A fanatical glint lit the Chief’s eye. He indicated the screen and its panoramic view of the crystal’s surface. ‘Only two of the rebel scum are left standing. But they did give us time to get the *Morningstar* there. We have to use it to kill the heathen offworlders! The Undying One will ensure 219

that our good intentions do not do his creation harm.’

The cultists, he could see, were not convinced. He took a tight hold on the woman’s wrist. ‘They’re trying to destroy the Miracle,’ he intoned, lending equal gravity to each syllable.

‘This is the only way to stop them!’

She allowed him to move her hand aside, although she didn’t step back. The Security Chief smiled tightly. ‘Recommence firing,’ he spoke into the grille. ‘Aim for the girl — she’s the only one armed!’

The screen flared white as the shipboard camera tried to cope with an influx of blast radiation. When its picture reassembled, the Chief cursed to see that the alien had escaped incineration, albeit by inches, and that another smoking hole had marked Enros’s gift to his planet.

‘Keep on her!’ The camera zoomed in closer. The woman had given up running and had rolled onto her back, her gun aimed upwards and directly at the screen. ‘in Enros’s name, what is she trying to do?’

‘Perhaps she is desperate,’ said the cultist doubtfully.

Ace *was* desperate.

She had seen many films in her time in which great flying dreadnoughts had been brought down by one carefully placed blast up an exhaust port or some other such convenient weak spot. In practice, she knew that that was a pretty slim option.

But when you’re pinned down on an artificial planetoid by the gravity thrusters of an enormous battleship which is using weapons more properly reserved for interplanetary war with the express intention of blasting you into boiling atoms, a slim chance is better than none.

She loosed shot after shot, but each one ricocheted off the hull of the *Morningstar* without damage, as she had expected. There was still one

trick to try, though: if that Detrian, Mortannis, could control the fictional energies here, then surely she could too?

Ace concentrated, trying to envisage a simple, handy shaft, just above her head, leading straight into the most fragile part of the ship's core. The effort was far more than she had 220

anticipated. Her head ached and she couldn't see for sweat, but she thought she could feel it . . .

The shaft was forming, the ship's metal skin receding before her brain power like an ice cube before a red hot poker.

Then she doubted for a second, and lost it.

She heard the clunk of the *Morningstar*'s guns recycling.

Ace had long since given up closing her eyes and making peace with her maker at moments like this. Instead, she closed her eyes and just hoped that the Doctor would be able to pull off his usual last-minute, split-second rescue.

She wasn't disappointed.

With a blast of hot air, the ship sped away, and Ace, coughing and blinking, recovered her vision in time to see an outboard propulsion unit attached to its stern and shooting it skywards at an impossible speed. The word 'ACME' was picked out in blue on the engine's front. She had been saved by Jason.

The young man was standing now, watching after the departing vessel, his features lit by a triumphant grin. So distracted, he failed to see that Mortannis was up and Wielding a heavy spanner which he had created himself. Before Ace even had time to shout, the Detrian cracked the implement down onto Jason's head and her saviour fell, unconscious before he hit the ground.

'There goes our most powerful weapon,' Ace grumbled.

There were three rebels left now, lined up against the Doctor and Ace. The Doctor and Mortannis could fight it out between them with their make-believe toys. That left her with the other two. But she felt unsteady and not at all sure that she would be able to handle them. She levelled her gun, but Mortannis reacted fast and tendrils of electricity closed about it, scorching her hands and making her drop the weapon.

For the second time, salvation came from an unexpected quarter. Bernice Summerfield appeared at the TARDIS door, blaster in hand, and shot down Mortannis before he even saw her. The Doctor moved in quickly and felled one of the others with a deceptively simple shoulder-grip. As Ace reached for her gun again, their final opponent risked all in a full frontal charge.

She halted him with a stiff upper-cut to the chin, followed by a crack across the jaw. When that dazed but didn't topple the muscular youth, Ace grabbed the blaster anyway and brought it down on his skull.

'That's the last,' she reported as he sprawled at her feet.

'Thank you Benny,' said the Doctor graciously. 'A timely intervention.'

'It was nothing. We saw what was happening on the scanner and — '

'"We"?'

Benny looked over her shoulder, puzzled. Ace guessed what had happened. As, unfortunately, did the Doctor.

'I suppose I should be grateful that she didn't actually come out and fight against me,' he said with forced bravery. Ace could see that the rejection had left him feeling more miserable than he would dare admit. She tried to see Mel's side of it too: she was no doubt in the TARDIS, watching and wishing that she knew which side to be on. Ace had been through all that herself, in her own time.

The trio stood in silence now, amongst the unconscious bodies of their fellow fighters. Seven Detrians and one of their own side. 'Makes a change for me not to be down there,'

remarked Benny.

'What now?' asked Ace, more practically.

'Now,' the Doctor said, 'we wake up Jason. He can send our friends here back to their planet. Then we can all get on with our mission.'

24

The Day God Went Mad

Kat'lanna and Thruskarr had checked each one of the four large wooden doors which led into Enros's Great Hall. They were all guarded, of course, by larger than normal contingents. The two intruders crouched in darkness around the corner of a long street leading to the eastern entrance, at which only five robed figures stood sentry.

'Perhaps we were wrong,' whispered Thruskarr eventually.

'We've seen no sign of Rokk or the others.'

Kat shook her head. 'They would have come here. We must have missed them.'

'So what do you think?'

'I think they're in the Great Hall. It might be over already.'

'Then there's nothing we can do.'

Kat thought for a moment, then made to step out into the main passage. Thruskarr jumped, startled, and pulled her back.

'I'm going to talk to them!' she protested.

'They'll kill you!'

'I'll say I've converted. I'm here to inform them of the rebel plot to murder Enros.'

'Then they'll kill Rokk!'

Kat hesitated. 'But what if he gets to Enros and dooms the planet?'

'We don't know that will happen!'

'I'm sure of it!' They locked eyes, each hoping to find reassurance in the other's stare.

From the direction of the Great Hall, they heard a male voice screaming.

* * *

223

'I'm cold,' said Chris.

Roz had to agree. Detrios was freezing: the surface could support life, but that was about all. Even so, it wasn't like her partner to complain about such things. He was trying to avoid thinking about what happened next. That, more than the temperature, caused Roz to shiver.

'Where now?' she asked.

'I don't know.' Chris scanned the dunes half-heartedly. 'I've never been to the surface before.'

'Then I suggest we find a way down.' He gave a slight nod, which Roz decided was consent enough. She set a brisk pace and hoped he would follow. She shuffled dust out from under her feet and kept her eyes peeled for downward-leading hatches.

'I'm not sure about this.'

She halted, surprised by her partner's sudden remark. He cut a solitary figure against the dull grey backdrop and she knew that, at this moment, it would be easy to persuade him to give in. He wanted that. She owed it to him not to let it happen.

'Can you turn back? Can you go home and forget about it all?' Chris shook his head. 'Come on then,' Roz said, her brusqueness masking her true emotions. 'Let's search.'

She just hoped she would be able to cope with the fallout later.

Without pause for thought, Kat broke cover and raced towards the Great Hall. Thruskarr reached to snatch her back, but he was too late. He followed reluctantly, but at a good pace despite that. They were halfway down the passage before Kat realized that, just beyond the now open door, a fight had broken out.

The five cultists had rushed into an ambush. Through a flurry of fists, sticks and knives, Kat saw the faces of Rokk and Myrg.

They had taken their foes by surprise, but the odds were still against them. Kat jumped in and propelled one cultist to the floor. Thruskarr took care of another, flipping him into a wooden bench. In seconds, it was over and only the four rebels were standing.

Now the heat of the moment had passed, Kat realized that the scream she had heard had come from Myrg's throat: the bait 224

which had lured his enemies within. He was leaning against the wall now, panting, whilst Rokk nodded only a brief acknowledgement to the new arrivals before hauling one of the groggy but conscious cultists to his feet. ‘I want to know where Enros is!’

His captive spat at him. Rokk increased his grip until the young man squealed. Kat was suddenly aware of banging from the other entrances. She saw that benches had been pulled in front of them. But the cultists were determined and the northern door was splintering beneath a concerted onslaught.

Thruskarr studied the shadows searchingly. ‘It doesn’t make sense that Enros would be anywhere else. This is the only guarded area.’

Rokk’s prisoner laughed, although his voice was hoarse. ‘Our Lord is too clever to be beaten by mere heathens. You will not find him.’ Kat remembered the so-called deity’s secret hiding place, in which he had concealed himself when she and Christopher had tried a similar assault. She almost revealed the information, then thought it might be best if Rokk didn’t share her knowledge.

Rokk lost patience and punched the cultist, who collapsed in a heap. He grabbed another. ‘One of them will tell us!’

Kat laid a hand on his arm. ‘We haven’t enough time. We’d be better off getting out of here!’

‘There are only four of us,’ Myrg agreed, worriedly.

‘Where is Krossli?’ asked Thruskarr.

‘He provided a diversion to get us in here,’ said Rokk. ‘I think they caught him.’ In a spurt of rage, he pinned the cultist against the wall. ‘That’s why this scum is going to tell me what he knows! I’m not letting our sacrifices be for nothing!’

Kat still hung onto his arm. ‘It’s not worth it!’ she insisted.

‘Listen, Rokk, I really think the world might end if Enros dies!’

Rokk whirled and stared at her with contempt. ‘Not you, of all people!’

‘No!’ she said hastily. ‘But —’

She was interrupted by a crash and a shout: the north door had fallen

and seven cultists charged into the Hall. Kat spun towards 225

the door she had entered by, but six more were hurtling from that direction. Rokk acted quickly, grabbing the knife from his captive's belt. He threw it to Kat, then brandished his stick. The outnumbered rebels moved, in a back-to-back circle, to the centre of the room.

The two attacking forces converged upon them.

Chris didn't recognize the area of the underground city into which he and Roz emerged. It was evidently residential: rough holes cut out of damp walls gave access to barely habitable caves. Most were partitioned off by curtains, but in others Chris saw ill-made furniture and family groups huddling together in fear. Many more civilians were out in the streets, talking in doom-laden tones, not knowing what to do as (so far as Chris could make out) civil war ran rife through their community.

Those people who noticed the visitors avoided them, displaying a mixture of fear and disgust.

'Come on,' Roz hissed as he faltered, his eyes drawn to the images of misery. 'Forget them.'

'I can't,' he protested. 'How could I? I never saw this last time. I thought of the Detrians as being just rulers, cultists and rebels. What about these people? What about the real inhabitants of the planet?'

'We can't help them all.'

'But to rescue one woman? It all seems so pointless. We can't let this happen. We can't let the Doctor . . .' He tailed off, realizing that he had begun to shout.

Roz looked at him with a pitying expression. She had known this all along; known just how futile their mission would be. But she had acceded to his demands anyway. She had even persuaded the Doctor to do likewise.

She had known that Chris had to see for himself.

He turned away to digest that revelation. His new line of sight brought him face-to-face with a Detrian woman. She was cowering in her dirty hovel and clutching a screaming child to her breast. Chris almost felt like crying himself, at the merciless inevitability of her fate.

Roz was there for him, as always. ‘Shall we head back to the 226

rendezvous point? Or do you want to carry on searching?’

‘They’re the cause of it!’ a hoarse, male voice interrupted, removing the need for that painful decision. The Detrians had chosen to avoid them no longer.

Chris felt Roz tensing. Her hand hovered over her gun and he reluctantly made his do the same. They were becoming surrounded by what he could only liken to a lynch-mob. Too many to fight; their only chance lay in calming them.

‘We’re not here to hurt you. Please let us pass. We’re simply looking for someone.’

‘Like Enros?’ You one of his pink-skinned alien friends?’ A murmur of discontent answered that cry.

‘No, no!’ another man piped up. ‘This one escaped from Enros!’

‘That’s right, I did,’ said Chris, eager to distance himself from the evil cult leader. ‘We’re no allies of his.’

‘They betrayed him,’ wailed an old woman. ‘Their defiance has brought this fate upon us!’ This time, to Chris’s dismay, the crowd fairly roared its agreement.

‘Fickle alien idiots,’ Roz growled. She went for her weapon, but two people jumped her from behind. Her grip loosened involuntarily and the blaster hit the floor.

So, a second later, did Chris and Roz. The Detrians, convinced of their unholy intent, acted with one bloodthirsty group mind and swarmed over them in an unstoppable torrent.

The chaos in the Great Hall was exacerbated by the sudden arrival of two more groups. Even as the third and final company of cultist sentries fought their way through the western door, twenty or more yelling rebels charged across the open northern entrance. Kat’s heart leapt, initially at her own unexpected reprieve, but again at the sight of her brother, Mortannis, at the head of this latter force.

A nanoseg later, she was trapped in the midst of a savage battle, and she hardly knew which way to turn. Bodies dropped, people toppled into her and Kat’s ears rang with the cries and clangs and sickening

thumps of an all-out war. She remembered the knife which Rokk had given her, but she couldn't bring 227

herself to use the lethal weapon. Instead, she waded through the melee, pulling crazed cultists away from her friends, delivering kicks here and there and doing what little good she could. As well as the rebels who had disappeared with Mort, Kat recognized some of those she had left at the hut. Her brother had succeeded in motivating them where she and Rokk had failed. And his efforts were paying dividends: the fight was surely turning their way.

In those confusing, exciting, somehow unreal moments, Kat's mind lurched from thought to thought: from Christopher (wherever he was now), to Enros (was he worried, or were things going as planned?) to the strong and comforting image of Mortannis (she didn't doubt that he would come out of this okay) to the Miracle, which shone down on them through the self-made hole in the roof of the Hall. She wondered if it really was a gift from some God more benevolent than Enros. And what that God would think of all this.

Then a strong voice, louder than human vocal chords could produce, ordered: 'Stop!' And, just like that, the fighting came to a ragged halt.

For a moment, Kat thought that that should amaze her. But her own body, like the rest, had been frozen immobile by the barked command. Enros, she realized, trying to think dispassionately, must have had an artificial voicebox fitted to amplify his words so.

The sight of the revealed cult leader was certainly a cautionary one. His machine-augmented, ravaged body glittered in the Miracle's blue-green radiance. That same light cast his features into shadow.

'I will not have this fighting amongst my subjects,' he intoned. Kat saw for the first time that he held a ceremonial knife. 'If this is the way the Detrians behave, then they do not deserve to survive in this life or the next.' A gasp of fear rippled from his audience as Enros poised the blade at his own chest. 'I demand and expect nothing less than your total faith. If I cannot have that — if one more blow is struck by any of you — then I will terminate this miserable reality!'

228

All those assembled, cultists and rebels alike, were stunned into silence. Kat felt somebody tense beside her; when she looked, she saw that it was Rokk. But even he, certain as he had been of his own beliefs, did not dare make a move.

Nobody dared to disobey.

Enros licked his thin lips and shifted his grip on the knife handle. His face twitched and he blinked rapidly. He spoke in a low, convincing, dreadful tone as he underlined his terrible threat.

'If you — any of you — choose not to follow me, then I shall commit suicide. If that happens, you will all die by my side!'

Roz had been stripped of weapons and was helpless against the frenzied crowd which herded her along the subterranean passageways. To make things worse, her partner seemed to have given up already. Chris stumbled along, a short way ahead but separated from her by an impenetrable mass of fear-driven natives. His head was bowed as if accepting his fate, perhaps as some perverse punishment for the Doctor's actions. She wanted to scream at him to show some courage, but the sounds of vociferous bloodlust deafened her and would have rendered such remonstrations inaudible.

As Roz was pushed and pulled up a metal ladder, she kicked out blindly in token protest. 'You miserable, weak-willed *sheep*!' By the time she lay with the taste of the surface world's dust in her mouth, she had wounded at least four of them. Not that that would help. One of the Detrians had appointed herself leader and, on her orders, the defenceless soldier was hauled back to her feet and borne towards a raised platform on which

— her stomach turned as she saw — a permanent set of gallows had been constructed from sturdy wood. Hangings were obviously commonplace on Detrios. She could think of better ways to go.

'Get them up here,' the mob leader bellowed over the clamour, although her compatriots were already doing just that.

'String the non-believers up!' Roz began to struggle again, her best hope that she would be able to inflict a few more painful bruises before she was subdued.

Then her captors drew back and she felt suddenly lost, standing on the platform, rope binding her wrists and tickling her throat, a trapdoor beneath her feet. The knots weren't tight and she weighed up her chances of being able to escape before the fatal lever was pulled. They weren't high.

She twisted to look at Chris instead. His eyes were closed and he was muttering something. The crowd were at fever pitch now, screaming for the aliens' lives and the approval which their sacrifice might bring. But, after a moment, she was able to read his lips. He was mouthing 'I'm sorry', over and over. She wanted to say something, but no words seemed sufficient.

She shuddered and held her head up high, and cursed all the fates for letting her die like this. For this, she knew with an icy certainty, was going to be the end for them both.

Unless, by some chance, a miracle could save them.

It was Mortannis who first attempted to break the deadlock in the Great Hall, although even he did not risk using physical means.

'Why should we be afraid of your death?' he challenged Enros. 'That's what most of us came here to achieve!'

'You would sacrifice your universe?'

'We don't believe your lies!' shouted Rokk, emboldened by Mort's lead.

Kat watched with a sensation of dread. She began to move through the crowd, feeling that she should be close when the moment came.

'I suggest that those who do believe,' said Enros softly,

'should kneel before me now. I require a show of unanimous devotion if I am to allow this existence to endure.'

Most of the cultists dropped immediately. By the time the rest had followed, a number of rebels were on their knees too. Still more wavered uncertainly before deciding to play safe.

Kat felt exposed, as one of only seven who remained on her feet.

'This desperate ploy of yours won't work,' Mort said. He sounded confident. Kat knew him well enough to know that was a bluff. 'Your cultists were defeated before you arrived. It's 230

over!'

Rokk started forward, fingering a knife which he had obviously picked up during the skirmish. A glare from Enros halted him.

‘Why don’t we take him prisoner?’ Kat spoke up. Her voice sounded terribly small.

‘And let him play the martyr?’ scoffed Rokk. ‘We have to prove that this faker’s death will mean nothing!’

A smile tugged at Enros’s emaciated features. He indicated the worshipful assembly. ‘And do you imagine that my new recruits will allow you to commit such a sin?’

‘Why not admit the truth?’ implored Mort. ‘We can end this.

We can get on with Detrios’s more pressing problems, united.’

Enros looked at the rebel leader with contempt. He opened his mouth to deliver a rejoinder. But Rokk had overcome his fears and doubts. He took advantage of the distraction, leaping across the Hall, knife raised. Enros jumped back with a most ungodlike strangulated cry. Some of the cultists were rising, alarmed, but they were far too late to prevent the inevitable.

Kat acted on instinct. She flung herself at Rokk and brought him down. He bellowed in frustration and threw her off, and now Mortannis was rushing Enros too.

Somehow Kat managed to place herself between the two avengers and their target: the fallen idol who cringed before them.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, her voice quavering, ‘but if you want to kill him, you’ll have to go through me first!’

25

Don’t Blame Me

In the end, it was easier than anyone expected.

Ace journeyed successfully through the crystal and almost enjoyed the experience. It had been too long since she had given her combat skills a sustained workout, and the macabre, *Aliens*-

type scenario which her mind obligingly provided was perfect for flexing her muscles in. The only drawback was the insectoid nature of her mindscape’s protagonists. They brought to mind the Charrl and the things which had burrowed under her skin on the Artifact; worst

of all, her mutated possible future self that she had seen when the TARDIS turned itself inside out. Insects were definitely her least favourite monsters.

At odd times, the Doctor appeared in Ace's 'dream' too, fighting alongside her, tight-lipped. In her most lucid moments, when she remembered that this wasn't the real world, she congratulated herself on his silence. He would always loom large in her thoughts, she knew that. But her *need* for him, once so terribly strong, so much a part of her, was suitably in the past. She had grown up.

The Doctor found catharsis too in his own journey. Fully aware of the nature of his surroundings, he concocted a fictional attack by Daleks and battled them in Earth's big cities, from London to Paris to New York to Tokyo. It was so simple. He was fighting evil, showing no mercy as he blasted those who had never deserved to exist. An ideal, black and white world, in which he wished he could live more often.

But he couldn't help thinking about those greys of reality.

And no matter how he strained to hold them back, they were still denting the barrier he had set up in his mind.

232

This Doctor's worst nightmare was working itself free.

Jason's last adventure ever went unrelated. He would return to the TARDIS later, a flush of colour in his cheeks, proclaiming that he had just had the best time of his life.

High up in the black sky of Detrios, the Miracle shuddered and began to die.

The Doctor had been the first to reach the crystal's centre. He had not needed a pill: his own post-hypnotic command was all he required to temporarily banish the solidified contents of his mind. It had not been long before his generator had confirmed that Ace and Jason were in position too. They had activated their devices together and the air had shimmered, a force wall forming around the universal breach. Too much fictional energy had already seeped into this dimension, but with Jason sucking it in like a battery on recharge, that shouldn't be a problem for long.

In the meantime, there was always the return journey to fret about.

For that, the Doctor created an idealized representation of Skaro, and continued his Dalek-hunting activities there. He even did what, in a previous incarnation, he had been unable to face: he confronted Davros in his own control centre and shot him down dead.

If only real-life solutions could be as simple.

The Doctor's head was aching and he wasn't able to keep control for much longer. The images of Skaro broke up and faded and suddenly he was running through blackness, desperate to reach the surface of the Miracle before . . .

Before . . .

A man stepped out of the darkness before him and barred his path. The Doctor's hearts sank.

'I've been wanting to talk to you.' The tone was threatening.

'I deny you!' the Doctor spat. 'You can't keep me here.'

The newcomer laughed, and the laugh was rich and malevolent. 'You're too late. I already have.' The blackness was metamorphosing, taking on form around him. Brick walls 233

formed into a perfect square. A room with no doors. 'A barrier, like the one you've kept me behind all these years.'

'You should have stayed there,' the Doctor growled.

'Why? Are you so afraid of me? Of what I might say?'

The facade crumbled. The Doctor's shoulders slumped. There was no point in denying it. 'I am.'

The other man's face darkened and a scowl wrinkled his brow. 'You killed me!' the sixth Doctor spat. 'You were so desperate to exist yourself that you ended my life. I accuse you,

"Doctor", of murder. Of suicide in the first degree!'

At first, no one could believe it.

Chris couldn't either, although he had known what the Doctor was planning. He was wrenched from his introspection, becoming painfully aware of the crowd that had bayed for his blood but a moment before. He looked up and saw the hopes of the Detrian people

destroyed, their Miracle shrinking; deflating and deforming like a child's balloon with a slow puncture.

It was Roz who dragged him forcibly back to reality. She was free of her noose and pulling at the knots which bound him.

'We've got our chance,' she hissed.

As they leapt down from the scaffold, someone shouted after them, but the previously dumbstruck crowd had started panicking and the voice was lost in noise as people realized they were going to die. Chris tried not to think about that. It felt like he was somewhere else, like this was all some terrible nightmare.

Any second now, I'm going to wake up and I'll be inside that damned crystal, delivering the Doctor's generator and I won't be responsible for any of this!

There were people wailing in his path and dropping, screaming, to the ground and hammering and crying for a God that no longer existed. Chris was dragged on by Roz's unrelenting grip when all he really wanted to do was fall and weep alongside them. She anchored him to the real world, propelling him through the hellish miasma of clutching hands and beseeching faces.

At one point, he lost her. He wheeled around and staggered 234

and almost fell, but somebody took hold of him and lifted him up and pressed a flat, round, metal object into his hand. 'A good luck charm,' the old woman whispered, her lined face looking kindly down on him, her eyes staring reassurance from beneath her tattered cowl. 'I know it's not your fault. Do what you have to. Do what you think is right.'

The crowd shifted then and the woman was gone, but Roz was back. 'Snap out of it. The time for grieving is when we're safe.'

He ran, but he was thinking of Kat'lanna and wondering how he'd ever believed that rescuing one person might somehow absolve him; might allow him to forget what he had done here.

What they had all done.

Without looking, Chris knew that the crystal was almost gone. He knew that the people who lived on Detrios were doomed. Real, three-dimensional people with personalities he would never get to know and as much right to their own existence as the single one he had sought

to find. He stayed close to his partner and tried to draw strength from her, the one constant in his life at that moment. Roz Forrester was all that was stopping him from giving up, from dying alongside them, from letting the pain end.

Roz Forrester, and the whispered words of a woman who had just been faced with her own mortality. ‘Do what you have to.

Do what you think is right.’

The Doctor’s predecessor was just as he remembered him. That catlike arrogance and the childish naivete in his handsome features; that costume, the jacket of clashing patchwork, the supreme evidence of an unbalanced nature. He hated him. But no, what he really hated was his own past. And, perhaps, his future. He had spent so many years avoiding both.

He wanted to keep on avoiding them.

‘I refuse to listen to you.’ He turned away, but the sixth Doctor reached for his shoulder, spun him round and pressed him up against the wall. His eyes were insane, his smile one of hatred.

‘You don’t have a choice. You can’t hide from my opinions 235

by closing your mind to them. The energies in this crystal have brought me out of your subconscious, given me form. I won’t surrender my existence again.’

‘What do you intend to do?’

‘I want my life back.’

‘You can’t have it.’

‘You owe it to me!’

‘I had to take it!’

His past self pulled away. The Doctor stumbled from the wall, recovered his composure and confronted him, eyes glittering with determination. ‘You were unstable. You were travelling the road that leads to the Valeyard.’

‘I was trying to avoid it!’

‘But you still met Melanie, you still destroyed the Vervoids.

You might have delayed our future but you couldn't avert it.

You almost killed Mel on Earth in 1999, when you were so close to becoming the Valeyard yourself. That was when I had to act. I had to come out and stop you.'

'And kill me!'

'And terminate your regeneration.'

'So that you could live!'

'So that you couldn't make any more mistakes!'

His sixth self released a scream of frustration and sprang for him with shocking speed. The Doctor brought his umbrella up and drove himself forward with the implement straining against his attacker's throat. The sixth Doctor's head hit the brickwork and they remained locked, jaws set, eyes staring mutual loathing into each other's.

His previous self had never been so unhinged. His enforced captivity, the perceived injustice of his demise, had done this to him. The duties of Time's Champion were responsible.

The Doctor's doubts lent strength to his earlier form. He threw his successor and the Doctor skittered back, bringing up his brolly and preparing for a second deadly thrust.

The sixth Doctor fell silent, choosing not to press his advantage for now. They stared at each other and the sixth Doctor clenched his fists, his breathing deep and tightly 236

controlled. They circled warily.

'I had to exist,' the seventh Doctor claimed, almost in desperation. 'You know that. No manifestation before me could consider the consequences of what we must do. We were too young when we left Gallifrey. We created paradoxes, set time on one course but undermined that too. Somebody had to tie the loose ends up. Somebody had to unwind the threads. Somebody had to become the Ka Faraq Gatri. I had to take responsibility.'

'To become the great manipulator,' the sixth Doctor sneered.

'To use your companions and condemn whole races. To satisfy some ungraspable concept of what you deem to be the Universal Good.'

‘That’s not how it is.’

‘How many people did you endanger on Earth, playing games with the Daleks? Manoeuvring them into destroying Skaro so that you wouldn’t have to do it yourself? Keeping blood of your hands! Like when you persuaded Benny and Chris to destroy Detrios from afar. What makes you think your version of right is better than mine? What makes you think that you won’t become the Valeyard?’

‘I have to be right!’

‘I knew what good was. I travelled. I found injustice, I sided with right and I beat back darkness. But I respected my travelling partners too. I practised decency and morality. You lie to them and trick them. You killed Ace on the moon. You left Kadiatu to her fate. You use them time and time again and never even tell them why. Doesn’t that make you feel guilty?’

‘Of course it does!’ the seventh Doctor howled. ‘Of course I do! That’s why you got free. Don’t you understand that? Of course I feel guilty. Each one I use, each one I sacrifice, is a piece out of my own soul. But I have my responsibilities too. To life, to justice.’

‘And the “Universal Good”?’

‘I can’t — I won’t — treat things as simplistically as you did.

The cosmos can’t afford for us to act like that any more.’

‘And the ones you’ve killed — the people that you’ve decided shouldn’t live on in the universe that you’re creating what about 237

them? What about Gabriel and Tanith?’

The seventh Doctor averted his gaze. ‘I do what I have to. I do what I think is right.’

The sixth Doctor took advantage of his distraction to attack.

The Miracle had been divested of its power. It was shrinking rapidly and, to Ace, stranded on the surface, it felt like she was balanced on perishing rubber.

She could feel that surface receding beneath her and she wondered how long the fictional energies could sustain the very air she breathed. She wondered where the Doctor had gone and she hoped

that he would find her still alive when he returned.

The seventh Doctor was down and the sixth Doctor's hands were about his throat, thumbs pressing down hard, mouth drooling saliva as his eyes flashed with the insanity that comes from long-denied retribution.

'You'll . . . kill us both,' Time's Champion choked. 'This crystal is melting. You'll kill me and you'll kill my companions.'

'Then give in to me!' the sixth snarled. 'Return what's mine.

Surrender your life so that I may live again.'

'Can't . . . do that.'

'Oh no, because you're so important, aren't you? Clinging on to existence even when the odds are against it; when you should have given in to Number Eight. Or me.'

'Or . . . Valeyard?'

The sixth Doctor reacted as if stung. His eyes flashed and he drew back his fist to punch the usurper across his face. 'I am not him!' He pulled back again, levered himself to his feet and staggered momentarily, a hand to his forehead. He seemed dizzy, unsteady; weakened by his foe's resolve.

The seventh Doctor took his chance. He left himself exposed and concentrated, willing the walls to fall and release him. He was unsuccessful. The sixth Doctor laughed. 'You're keeping yourself blocked in, because you know my cause is just.'

'I won't let you do this.'

'You don't have a choice. If you give in, I can save our 238

friends. To leave, you will have to find a way through me.'

The seventh Doctor glowered at him and tried to remember that this was but a fictional creation: a representation of what was inside his own mind. He needed to keep that thought clear if he was to do what needed doing.

The construct was awaiting his move. The Doctor shifted his grip on the umbrella and squared up to him; took a deep breath and tried to forget that he was battling a part of his own self.

‘So be it,’ he said in a hushed tone. ‘Let’s end it.’

On Detrios, at the pick-up point, Chris stared up at what now looked like a distant ball of grey wax, melting in a furnace heat

— the remnants of what had once held so much hope for so many.

‘It had to be done. You know that, don’t you?’ Roz was staring and Chris felt as though she was testing him; as though a wrong answer, a sign of any lack of understanding might get him flunked right out of the service.

She was right. He knew that.

‘That thing was a menace to life across the universe.’

‘I realize that,’ he said. He turned to take in the wretched mess of the desolate planet. ‘But what does that mean for these people? They were rebuilding, just coming out here onto the surface. We’ve destroyed the only chance they had of life.’

Roz shrugged. ‘If they’re worthy, they’ll survive. They don’t need a Miracle.’

‘You believe that?’

‘It doesn’t matter what I believe. They still have a chance, that’s all. They aren’t dead yet.’

He didn’t answer. He turned away and tried to drift off into his own dark thoughts. Roz stemmed them, laying a hand on his. ‘There might still be time to look for her, you know.’

He shook his head. ‘There’s no point. We can’t save everybody and she won’t want to leave her people.’ He snorted bitterly. ‘She’s probably dead now anyway. Lying sliced open on a slab somewhere.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Roz said. Chris wondered how he could ever have become so confused about her; how he could have 239

questioned their relationship. They were best friends, pure and simple.

‘I’m sorry too. I didn’t act much like a trained Adjudicator back there.’

‘It’s hard sometimes. I know more than most. You just have to pick up the pieces.’

Chris nodded, but didn't meet her gaze. He was looking at the crystal again. 'That's what the Detrians have to do now too,'

she said gently.

'I know,' he said. 'You're right. They can still do something.

They aren't dead yet.'

He gave Roz a wan smile. 'And neither, I suppose, are we.'

'What the hell kept you?'

Ace practically fell into the TARDIS and gulped in deep breaths of its sweet, rich air. The Doctor was silent. He remained at the console and reset the coordinates.

'Don't tell me you had problems?' Ace mocked. She grinned, looking over to him for some form of rejoinder. The expression froze as she saw him properly for the first time. 'Bloody hell.

What happened to you?'

'It doesn't matter. It's over now.'

'All except for the cleaning bill. Who did you murder?' He looked at her sharply, but chose not to answer. He returned to his work, but Ace's eyes were captivated by the stains on his jacket and his skin. There was even a splash of blood on his face. 'You must have some pretty wild dreams,' she said.

She was obviously not going to get an explanation. She found herself wondering what sort of dreams he did have. She wondered to what lengths he had gone to triumph over his own mind.

As the fictional blood began to evaporate from the Doctor's hands, Ace wondered if the metaphorical stains could ever fade.

26

And They All Lived

Kat'lanna stared up through the hole in the Great Hall's roof and wiped a stray tear from her cheek as the Detrian Miracle's death-throes continued. 'What was it all for in the end?' she whispered. 'Our

planet is doomed despite all we've been through.'

She felt Thruskarr's hand on her shoulder. His sibilant voice came softly, haltingly. 'You told me what the alien said, what you worked out together.'

'I know,' she sighed. 'That the Miracle was no real answer.

And I knew in my heart that it couldn't last. It's Just hard to imagine a better salvation.'

'It will come,' the lizard man assured her. 'So long as the survivors of this catastrophe can work together, on something which will benefit us all.'

Kat wrenched her gaze away from the depleted crystal. The Hall was still full of people, but there was no fighting. Those of both sides who were not dead or unconscious were staring at the sky or weeping on their knees or sitting with heads buried, unable to believe all that had happened.

Somebody had taken advantage of the distraction to slip a knife into Enros's gut. He coughed blood and spasmed as his soul went to whatever final rest he had brought upon himself.

Kat knew it could have been much worse. If Rokk had managed to kill him only moments earlier, the Undying One's fall would really have coincided with that of the Miracle. His immortality in Detrian beliefs would have been assured, and who knew what might have been done in his name then? As it was, few people spared his carcass a second glance. The discredited Messiah, defeated and exposed; and dead, now.

241

The Doctor was spotless once more. Only the dejected hunch of his shoulders remained as evidence of whatever he had been through. Ace studied him as he allowed Jason into the TARDIS

and dematerialized once more, bound for Detrios. If she knew him half as well as she thought she did, then he was definitely worried about something.

Had he fretted so much about her, she wondered? Had he been as hurt when she turned against him?

Chris Cwej walked in almost as soon as the doors opened. He spared the Doctor only a brief nod as he bustled through to the internal corridor, fists clenched and head down. Ace was genuinely taken aback by the hurt that this dismissal precipitated in the Doctor's expression.

'You didn't bring her then,' he said to Roz, as she followed.

His voice was dull and he had turned so that neither she nor Ace was able to see his face. He pretended to be working at the ship's controls.

'It's all gone,' Jason announced. Ace looked up, surprised by the sudden outburst. He wasn't addressing anybody in particular. His eyes were staring into the mid-distance. 'It's draining away,' he said.

Roz had hesitated, torn between answering the Doctor's question and pursuing her partner. 'He learnt the hard way,' she said. 'He'll get over it.' Then she chose the latter option, calling out Chris's name as she hurried after him.

'No more stories,' Jason wailed painfully, wrapping his arms about himself. He seemed oblivious to everything else.

'What are we going to do with him?' Ace asked.

The Doctor sighed and walked over to the young man. He regarded him intently for a second, then seemed to reach a decision. He passed his hand briefly over Jason's eyes and commanded: 'Sleep.'

'You're going to wipe his memory, aren't you? I thought you were learning your lesson about that.' The Doctor glared at her and Ace almost felt guilty about her accusation. 'Still playing head games?' she clarified, one eyebrow raised.

'I'm giving him a chance to live.'

'You're correcting the Time Lords' mistake for them, more like. Finishing of their botched job. Cleaning up the Land of Fiction's remains.'

'It's better for everybody this way.'

Ace shrugged. 'So long as you can still justify mucking with people's minds.' He continued to subject her to his penetrating stare. She

studied the console and pretended not to be affected.

‘Are you taking him home then?’ she asked him finally.

The Doctor returned to the console sulkily. ‘England, 2001,’

he grunted.

The following week passed in a dull blur, and later, Kat would find it hard to distinguish in her memories between one day and the next. The Detrians went underground again, their brief forays to the surface halted by the eventual loss of atmosphere.

The power they had drained from the Miracle vanished from their grids and even the most optimistic estimates said that life would be extinct on the planet within two generations.

Not all things were so bleak. Mortannis’s return had filled Kat with joy. She had assumed him dead, but instead he had incredible tales to tell. His story tallied with — and expanded upon — what she already knew, although she was disappointed not to hear any mention of her erstwhile alien confidante.

Kat’lanna was amazed at how much respect Mortannis commanded now. Disillusioned cultists flocked to his outcast band in droves and many of the Ruling Family’s supporters were noticeably quiet, ashamed to admit their Political inclinations. In the cold darkness which followed the pronouncement of death upon Detrios, allegiances shifted like the wind.

Mortannis addressed as many as he had time for. He Preached on the possibilities of survival, on ideas such as Wind power and hydro-electricity and the harnessing of fossil fuels, all things which had been postulated before the first Great Darkness began. They had squandered, he said, most of the reprieve that their ancestors had bought them. But, although things looked bad now, there was still time, and thus hope, for their race.

Most of those who heard him believed. They understood why they couldn’t wait for a fairy-tale ending such as the Miracle had once promised. What Detrios needed was for all people, all classes, to work productively at overcoming their considerable problems. They couldn’t afford to fall back into the old ways of politics, mistrust and superstition.

Kat'lanna was proud of her brother and happy too with Thruskarr's continuing companionship, himself proving a useful orator in the fight to win back the support of the decimated and resentful lizard people. Neither knew what the future held. Kat's feelings had turned a full loop since that night they had talked in the old but on the surface. She wasn't sure that she knew which way was up any more and she wanted time for things to settle before she tried to sort through her own emotions. Thruskarr, bless him, understood her needs. And, in the new society they were building, such choices would at least be theirs to make alone.

But, uppermost in Kat's mind through this unsettled period, was one man: one man who had given her hope when hope had died, reviving feelings when she had thought she might not feel again. One man whose courage and optimism had dragged her and her planet into a bold new era.

Kat didn't really know why Christopher's friends had done what they had. She wondered if he had tried to stop them, if they had disposed of him and gone ahead with their plans anyway. From what he had said, though, she doubted that they had. She suspected that the destruction of the Miracle had been for the greater good of all.

She couldn't look at the sky any more. It didn't matter: there was nothing to see there. She stared at the internal lighting instead, night after night, for long months after the handsome alien's departure. She accepted, too, that he had had to leave.

His destiny she knew, was in the stars.

But what Kat'lanna could not understand was why he had never come back to find her.

Mel followed Bernice into the console room, a shapeless grey hold-all slung over her shoulder. The Doctor looked up as she 244

entered. She saw that, behind him, the doors were open.

'Are we there?'

'I had another little errand first.' He glanced at the bag.

'Your friend helped me go through one of your wardrobes.'

'I hope you don't mind,' Benny said apologetically. 'She didn't have anything.'

You left me with nothing,' Mel said icily, 'when you turfed me out. And I see you got rid of it all.'

'I did explain about our swapping TARDISes,' Bernice reminded her.

The Doctor didn't say anything; not until Ace had returned from escorting the dazed Jason out into his home. She was dressed like some secret agent, Mel thought: long trenchcoat, shades and rucksack. So much had changed.

The Doctor set the ship in motion, then asked Mel solemnly where she wished to go. She answered him firmly and decisively. 'Home.'

'How long since you left 1986?'

'Four years.'

'Then would you prefer 1990?'

She shrugged. Ace interjected: 'Anywhere in that decade.'

She patted her backpack. 'We'll fine tune things later, when we've taken in a few sights.' The Doctor nodded without expression. Mel didn't understand the exchange, nor did she care much.

'One question,' she said, a challenge in her tone. 'How could your double find me so easily? You kept tabs on me through the TARDIS, didn't you?' She took his silence as affirmation.

'Then you knew I was trapped on that horrible planet and you never lifted a finger to rescue me.'

'I thought Avalone was a nice place,' the Doctor said guiltily.

'I imagined you'd settled down there.'

'"A nice place"? No, Doctor, I don't think you're the sort to be taken in by glossy brochures. You just wanted to know where I was, in case you needed to use me! Because that's all I ever was to you, wasn't it? A pawn! To be manipulated and removed from the board as soon as someone with a few less 245

scruples came along!' She shot a look towards Ace, who seemed offended but chose not to interrupt.

She pressed on, ignoring the Doctor's wounded expression.

‘What was it, Doctor? This further use you had in mind?

Because, whatever it was, you can forget it! I’m not dancing to your tune again.’

The TARDIS landed and the Doctor opened the doors without a word. Mel stalked towards the entrance, but hesitated (although she didn’t know why) and turned to him. ‘I’m going now. I doubt we’ll meet again.’

He just nodded. She expected him to argue, at least, to convince her there was still good in him. His silence hurt. It was the last time she would be hurt like that by him or anyone.

‘You’re not the Doctor I knew,’ Mel said, holding back hot.

painful tears. ‘You’re a liar and a user and quite possibly a murderer. I don’t wish to know you any more!’

An almost tangible silence followed Mel’s departure. The Doctor stared at the open door, as if expecting her to walk back in. Bernice was shuffling her feet uncomfortably.

When Ace made a move, the Doctor looked to her in sudden panic. She knew what he was thinking. Was she walking out on him too? She gave him a calculatedly reassuring smile. ‘I’ll catch her up and sort her out,’ she promised. ‘That’s if she’ll let me. She’s not that thrilled about what I’ve turned into either.’

She walked over to Bernice and the pair hugged briefly. Ace slapped her friend on the arm and grinned. ‘I’ll see you in December then.’

She turned to the Doctor and their eyes met again. He still hurt, and that pain melted her heart. ‘Oh, come here!’ Ace said, embracing him affectionately. ‘You might be a bastard, but you’re still our bastard.’

She headed for the door then, but turned back as she reached the threshold. ‘Just make sure you do something about you-know-who,’ she said sternly.

The console room was in semi-darkness when Bernice returned to it an hour later, refreshed by a steaming hot bath. The Doctor 246

was bent over the controls, although he didn’t seem to be doing anything.

‘What’s this?’ she called, straining to make her voice sound casual. ‘Mood lighting?’

He straightened and turned. His expression was carefully neutral, but she saw worry in his posture and in the lines about his eyes. He looked older than he had that morning. ‘How are they?’

‘Chris and Roz?’ He nodded eagerly. She shrugged. ‘All right.’

‘Do they trust me?’

‘Oh, Doctor.’

‘Well? Do they?’

‘You know that Roz always has, implicitly.’

‘The loyalty of the trained soldier.’

‘She understands, that’s all.’

‘And Chris? What about him? Can he forgive me?’

Bernice walked over and leant on the console. She chose her words carefully. ‘He’s had a bad time. It had to happen eventually — occupational hazard, you know. But I think he understands why you did what you did. He’ll get over it. We all do.’

The Doctor nodded, but the haunted look didn’t leave him.

made such a mess of things with you and Ace. I was dedicated to my mission, intent on untangling the timelines, on fulfilling my duties. I became so engrossed in that that I neglected the interpersonal dimension. I asked you to understand me but I never tried to understand you, or to even see what you were going through.’ He looked away so that shadows masked his face. ‘Ever since Ace left, since I had to replace her, I’ve known it could all happen again. Accusations, confrontations, distrust. I wanted to avoid it. That’s why I didn’t tell them about Detrios, even though I thought I could have made them understand. I can’t afford to lose them.’

Bernice had followed his words in silence. It wasn’t often Ile unburdened himself, and never like this. When he concluded, however, she bristled almost automatically. ‘Why can’t you 247

afford it? Because you value their friendship? Or is it just that they’re important? To your mission, your games?’

‘My games are important.’

‘And you do what you have to. I know.’

‘And do you understand?’

She didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure that she could.

The Doctor shook himself and returned to the controls. ‘What we need now,’ he mused, his voice brighter (but forced, Benny thought), ‘is a vacation. Some rest and relaxation on Florana. Or maybe a trip to the Eye of Orion.’ He glanced up and Benny was pleased to see a twinkle in his eye. ‘We could visit Avalone, get the whole joint popping again.’

She reached and guided his hand from the console. ‘I’ve a better idea. Why not a simple adventure for once? Run through your Great Plan, you must have an easy one lined up somewhere. We could find an injustice, put together a rebel army, lead the people against an unfair system and make sure that Good wins.’

‘And they all live happily ever after?’

‘How about it?’

The Doctor smiled, more genuinely now, and began to work again. ‘I’m laying in random coordinates. I think that’s best, don’t you?’

She smiled back, understanding.

‘Wherever we land,’ he said, ‘whatever we find . . . we’ll do what’s right.’

And finally, the Doctor slept: a rare occurrence, but he felt it was necessary. He took control of his dreams and strolled around the landscape of his psyche. He talked to his other selves: the librarian, the ferryman, even the one he had once crucified on the cross of his insensitivity. And they were worried. As worried as he was.

The remaining six gathered around the barrier. It had darkened to black but it still pulsed hatefully. They concentrated, pooling their minds and strengthening its substance, layer upon layer. They ignored the shouts of the one within; his threats that, one day, when the body’s strength was 248

at its lowest, he would reach out from the recesses of the subconscious and seize it.

More than ever, it was imperative that the seventh Doctor should survive. A regeneration crisis might serve to free him.

The Doctor woke. It took a moment to reorient his senses, to remember that he was floating in the Zero Room's null-gravity environment. He lay still for a while and probed his own mind tentatively, to see if the danger had passed. It had, for now.

There were still cracks in the barrier. That was inevitable. It was too late to repair them completely, but he could do something. There were still some ways to stave off the guilt, to begin to sew up some of the fractures.

The TARDIS was silent as he walked its corridors. Its occupants, he imagined, were sleeping off the hurts he had inflicted upon them. He remembered the confrontation in the crystal and he found it hard to deny the accusations which had been put.

He remembered his past self, transforming as they battled.

The body lying face-up, features lengthening, clothes darkening. His greatest fear made real before him. A possible future which, in the Doctor's arrogance, he had thought had been denied forever.

For all his intentions and all his games, he was still capable of becoming the Valeyard.

It was a contemplative Doctor who arrived in the console room. His thoughts had turned to Kadiatu Lethbridge-Stewart.

He hadn't made his decision about her Yet, and he knew that his companions might take issue when he did. He might have to hurt them all over again.

He couldn't let that matter. Nor could he avoid his duties any longer. He had to deal with the situation.

'I'm truly sorry,' he said, the apology directed towards them all in their absence. He reset the coordinates. 'But my duty must take precedence after all.'

249

Head End

Jason woke up and it had all been a dream.

He lay there uncertainly for a while, brain churning as though full of thoughts he couldn't access.

He was on his bed, fully clothed in his customary jeans and T-shirt and black boots. A draught found its way around the window frame as it always did and he heard the sound of thumping music from next door. It seemed that nothing was different, and yet he knew somewhere in the recesses of his subconscious mind that it was.

He thought he had to do something today. Write something.

Something important. It had fled from his grasp though and he couldn't quite catch it.

He wondered what he was doing with his life.

He hadn't expected to think that. He chased the question around for a few minutes, turned it over and looked at it from all sides. Did he have any ambitions? Well, he'd always wanted to work in the media. Perhaps he should do something about that. Today. And look up his parents. And consider a new place to live.

Jason saw his whole life stretching ahead of him.

He climbed up oil the bed, deep in thought, and absentmindedly began to gather the screwed-up balls of paper which littered the carpet. He dropped them into the wicker waste bin, then reached to pull the last one from the roller of his typewriter.

He paused and looked at it.

It seemed to be a short story which Jason didn't remember writing. A story about himself and about the stranger who had 250

come to visit him one evening and taken him into a series of new adventures.

He read the story through three times, brow furrowing in confusion. He stared for an especially long time at the closing seven words.

And they all lived happily ever after.

Jason struggled to cling onto the memories which swam through his head.

'This isn't Hell,' the Doctor assured her. 'It's only a sequel.'

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